Learning to discuss, discussing to learn: a study of tutorial groups in a faculty of social sciences

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A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Edinburgh

June, 1995

I certify that this thesis has been written by me and is my own work

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on an interview study of student and tutor experience in, and perceptions of, tutorial groups in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. The interview study itself formed part of a wider project investigating tutorial teaching. This wider project involved non-participant observation of tutorials led by ten 'expert' tutors, analysis of transcripts of audio-recordings of tutorial talk, interviews with a sample of 52 students drawn from the tutorials which were observed, and interviews with the ten tutors. A key consideration in sampling was the wish to observe good practice in this form of teaching. Accordingly the tutors whose classes were observed, and who were interviewed, were chosen on the basis of their local reputation as highly skilled practitioners.

Much of the past research in this area has had a fairly narrow focus of attention, concentrating on aspects of the process of discussion, group dynamics and the role of the tutor as facilitator of discussion. This thesis draws attention to a number of aspects of tutorial teaching which have received little attention in preceding research studies, such as the connections between tutorials and the wider learning system in which they are situated, and the tutor's role as a teacher and subject expert. Considerable attention is given to the tutors' teaching actions and it is argued that tutors can be viewed as acting simultaneously to enable and constrain students' understanding. The importance that tutors placed on creating a supportive, 'safe' group climate is described and the dilemmas that tutors faced in their day-to-day practice are also explored.

The thesis examines aspects of the moral order that both tutor and staff participants believed ought to prevail within tutorials and the complex set of expectations that the student participants in the study held concerning how tutors should exercise their authority. The discussion of participants' expectations of how tutors should, and should not, display their authority points up the need for more adequate theories of power in educational settings.

Distinct changes were evident in students' experience of tutorials, and in the reported quality of discussion, as they progressed through the years of undergraduate study. Becoming a competent participant in academic discussions is viewed, from the findings of this study, as a considerable achievement; and key features of the practice of argument in academic discussions are highlighted within the thesis. It is suggested that developmental change in the experience of tutorials points up the need to re-examine some of the guidelines for good tutoring practice that have been provided in the past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very conscious of my indebtedness to the tutors and students who generously gave me access to their tutorials and made this study possible. I would like to express my gratitude to them. I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement, support and guidance that I received throughout this period of study from my supervisors, Professor Noel Entwistle, Department of Education, and Dr. Dai Hounsell, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, University of Edinburgh. Thanks also go to Dr. Kate Day, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, University of Edinburgh, for comments on specific parts of the manuscript.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Background

This thesis reports on an interview study that was conducted on tutorials in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. Tutorials, small group discussions that focus on some aspect of an academic discipline, and which are customarily led by a lecturer, form an integral part of the teaching which undergraduate students receive in British institutions of higher education. In social science departments in the University of Edinburgh, these tutorials usually take place every week during term time in each of a student's courses and may take a number of different forms. Usually they are approximately an hour in length. Some centre around the discussion of a particular topic, and students are asked to read around this topic in the week preceding the tutorial. In others an individual student, or a subgroup of students within the tutorial, may make a short presentation which is followed by a wider discussion. In science based subjects and also in some social science subjects, such as Accountancy, discussion usually centres around the solution of problems and the wider points of theory that are raised by specific problems. Particularly in the first year of undergraduate study, tutorials may be used to pass on advice concerning essay writing, examinations and other academic tasks. Tutorials may also serve as a forum where individual students may raise difficulties that they are experiencing in understanding some aspect of a course.

Advocates for university discussion groups have claimed that they provide an arena where 'active' learning can take place and critical thinking can be encouraged. At the same time students are seen as having the opportunity to enhance their communication skills. It has also been claimed that discussion groups which are run in a 'democratic' way can encourage students to think more independently and to gain confidence in their own abilities. Here, for

example, is Abercrombie, who was a leading exponent of the benefits of tutorial work, on this theme:

> The group system aims to emancipate the student from the authority-dependency relationship and to help him develop intellectual independence and maturity through interaction with peers, by glimpsing not only the context in which a more experienced scholar sees his problem, but the various contexts in which several equals see the problem.
> (Abercrombie, 1974)

The current study was prompted by three main sources of personal interest in tutorials. One of these was an awareness that very little research had been conducted on this area in recent years and a dissatisfaction with some of the older studies on a number of counts. It struck me as being an area that was ripe for fresh exploration.

To be more specific, there was an upsurge of interest in studying tutorials in the period of the late 1960s and 1970s but there have been few studies in more recent years. Most of the research on tutorials has had an appropriate concern with issues of good practice, and has produced findings which are of considerable value for day-to-day practice. However, as Chapter 2 will reveal, research work in this area has not always been methodologically robust.

To my mind, preceding work on small group teaching has also had a fairly narrow focus. The accent in many studies has been on examining processes in small groups. Although it clearly is necessary to gain a full and sharply focused picture of the processes of interaction within discussion groups, the concentration of research attention on this topic has had unfortunate consequences. It has meant that there is only a very slender database of knowledge on matters such as: the tutor's teaching role, forms of discourse employed within university discussion groups, and the relationship between tutorials and the wider teaching/learning system of higher education.

Chapter 2 will suggest that there has been a tendency in some previous studies for researchers to take a prescriptive, preformed stance on the nature of the relationships that should obtain within tutorials or the actions that a tutor ought, and ought not, to be pursuing. There appeared to be a need for

a study which avoided prescription and attempted, in contrast, to gain a clear sense of *students' perceptions* of what were appropriate or inappropriate actions for a tutor to pursue.

A second source of engagement with this topic came from a general interest in talk within educational settings and a particular concern with studying learning from a sociocultural perspective where central emphasis is given to the nature and power of particular discursive practices. It will be suggested later in the thesis that this 'neo-Vygotskian' account of learning provides a very appropriate theoretical frame for understanding university tutorials. At the same time, focusing attention on university tutorials can raise some interesting questions and introduce a few complexities into the neo-Vygotskian account of learning.

The third source of personal interest in this topic relates to policy and practice. The higher education system in Britain has changed very considerably from the period of the 1970s when much of the research was conducted. In recent years there has been a considerable expansion in student numbers in British universities without any corresponding increase in staff numbers. This has in many cases led to a rise in the size of tutorial groups, and some large departments in the University of Edinburgh have moved from weekly tutorials for first year undergraduates to fortnightly tutorials. Tutorials as a form of teaching are therefore under some pressure; and it seemed timely to conduct a study of them during this period of considerable change in the higher education system in Britain.

An outline sketch of the methods that were employed to pursue these interests and objectives is provided below.

Summary of the study

The interview study which is reported in this thesis formed part of a wider research project in which the following methods of investigation were employed:

- non participant observation of 14 tutorial groups drawn from different social science departments within the University of Edinburgh,
- analysis of audio-recordings of the discussion,
- interviews with a sample of students (52) who took part in the tutorials which were observed,
- interviews with ten tutors concerning their aims for, beliefs and feelings about tutorials.

Observations and interviews were conducted in the winter and spring terms of the academic year, 1991-1992.[1] A key consideration in sampling was the wish to observe what was regarded locally as good practice in the conduct of tutorials. Accordingly the tutorials which were observed were led by lecturers who had a reputation among colleagues and students as being skilled in facilitating small group discussion.

The style of the interviews was interactive and focused. Topics which were explored with the student participants during their interviews included: what helped, or hindered, personal participation and active listening in tutorials; their opinions concerning group atmosphere; how they reacted to tutors' direct questions and 'clarifying' questions; the connections between tutorials and other parts of a course; whether there was sufficient opportunity in tutorials to explore difficulties with course content; their reactions to other students' contributions; their willingness to debate a point with other students; preference for more wide-ranging or more focused discussion; perceptions of change in experience of tutorials over time; etc. .

There was greater variability across the staff interviews in the topics that were covered compared to the student interviews. All of the tutors were asked about the satisfactions and dissatisfactions they experienced in

[1] All of the work of data-collection, analysis and reporting has been conducted by the author of the thesis.

running discussion groups as a way in to discovering how they conceived of a good or bad tutorial. Perceptions of different year groups and of their own response to different year groups was another topic which was examined across the interviews with the tutors. Other matters pursued with the staff informants included how they would react: to the idea of formal assessment of student performance in tutorials and to the suggestion that more might be done to assist students to develop their oral 'communication skills'.

As will be clear already, this research project on small group teaching has been quite a large enterprise and it has generated an extensive body of qualitative 'data'. A key concern in writing this thesis was thus to ensure that a clearly focused and detailed account was provided and that attention was not spread thinly over the different types of research material that were collected. Accordingly, this thesis has concentrated on reporting and interpreting the interviews that were conducted with the student participants and with the ten tutors. The review of the literature indicated that little work had been done investigating both student and tutor perceptions of tutorials, and that perceptions of important aspects of small-group teaching have been left unexplored. It therefore appeared in this thesis to be appropriate to keep effort directed on the object of gaining a fuller and clearer picture of student and staff views of small group teaching. (Findings from the observations of tutorials and analysis of the transcripts of tutorial talk will be reported in future publications.)

Having indicated the methods used, the next step is to summarise the contents of the subsequent chapters of the thesis and outline some of the principal themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Organisation of the thesis

The starting point is a literature review which is divided into two chapters with rather different purposes. Chapter 2 situates the present study within the context of previous research work on the topic. It uses the seminal work of Abercrombie to consider how early advocates of small group teaching defined its nature and purposes. It also shows how the account of small

group teaching provided by these pioneers has influenced subsequent writing, research and practice, before considering more recent trends in writing on this area and possible ideological influences on practice.

In addition to taking a close, and sometimes critical, look at past research work on small-group teaching, Chapter 2 summarises a few key studies on students' conceptions and styles of learning. These studies provide insights into the purposes that students may be pursuing in tutorials and the expectations that they may possess concerning how debate should be organised.

Whereas Chapter 2 is concerned with grounding the present study in a historical framework by examining preceding work on the topic, the second part of the literature review, contained in Chapter 3, aims to give the study a theoretical grounding. Much of past research work on small group teaching has been somewhat 'atheoretical' in character. The 'turn to talk' within the social sciences, with its emphasis on the social construction of meanings and the rhetorical character of much everyday interaction, has provided a number of theoretical frameworks which can be used to illuminate important features of tutorials. The framework of ideas which seemed most apposite for a study of university tutorials was the 'neo-Vygotskian' account of learning where there is an emphasis on how appropriating particular new meanings or a wider understanding of a topic involves a process of active negotiation (Wertsch, 1991). Chapter 3 begins, therefore, with an examination of the relevance of the work which follows the tradition established by Vygotsky and Bakhtin to the study of tutorials; but goes on to introduce a critical element in recognising the asymmetries in knowledge and power which influence the tutorial situation.

Chapter 4, Methodological Issues and Procedures, describes in detail the different stages of research work and provides a rationale for the key research decisions that were taken within this study. In particular, it explains and justifies the stance that I adopted as observer, interviewer and analyst towards the participants of the study and the approach adopted to questions of validation, the work of analysis and the style of reporting.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 then present the 'findings' of the study. A key finding of this interview study was that students' reported experiences of tutorials changed markedly over the course of their undergraduate career. Accordingly Chapter 5 examines the set of changes over time in students' experience and perceptions of tutorials. This chapter is divided into two parts; moving from an account of how participants described the transition from school to taking part in discussion groups at university to the longer-term process of fuller acculturation to the practices of discussion groups and of university life in general. It shows how, in the experience of students, the quality of discussion increased over the years as they gained subject knowledge and expertise in tackling academic tasks. This increase in knowledge also affected the asymmetry of position between tutor and students – an aspect which becomes an important concern of the thesis.

Chapter 6 analyses students' comments concerning specific aspects of tutorials. It allows an account to be given of the complex web of expectations that the students held concerning how tutors should exercise their role and authority and the marked divisions of opinion that existed among them about how discussion should be structured. The informants' perceptions of fellow students' actions in tutorials are also explored. Past research has not looked in a systematic manner at how undergraduates feel about actively debating a point with another student within university discussion groups. This matter was a principal topic of investigation within the current study. It has already been noted that previous studies have also given insufficient attention to the connections between tutorials and the wider learning context in which they are situated. In the final part of Chapter 6, *tutorials in context*, there is an attempt made to map out some of the details of this hitherto unexplored territory.

Chapter 7 looks at small group teaching from the perspective of the ten expert tutors who were interviewed in the current study. It begins with an examination of the interconnected features which this group of expert practitioners identified as constituting a good tutorial. All of the tutors stressed the importance of the task of creating a group climate where students could feel safe to discuss issues and to raise difficulties with course content. However, their talk on creating a safe environment revealed how

acting to achieve a safe environment may both support and conflict with the tutor's attainment of other important goals.

Little attention has been given previously to how tutors think about leading groups of first year as opposed to final year students. The tutors in the present study described considerable differences in their perceptions of, relationships with, and actions towards, first year student groups in contrast to groups of students in their third and fourth year.

After discussing tutors' reactions to whether students should be assessed on their performance within tutorials and whether more attention might be given to 'oral communication skills', the final part of Chapter 7 looks at certain *constraints* on achieving their goals which tutors identified, including the unwelcome increase in the size of tutorial groups.

The final discussion chapter summarises the principal themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts of the students' and tutors' interviews and then examines each of these themes in turn. It also restates important caveats concerning the limitations of the current study and urges the need for caution in generalising from its findings. Nevertheless, this thesis has broken new ground in the study of discussion groups by drawing attention to aspects of tutorial teaching which were pushed into the background in previous research.

It highlights the features of the moral order that staff and student informants believed ought to prevail within tutorials and delineates the complex set of expectations that students held concerning the tutor's role and authority. Discussion of questions of authority and consent in tutorials points up inadequacies in some current theorising on power in educational settings.

Whereas past research has tended to focus on the tutor's role as *facilitator* of discussion, the current thesis gives considerable attention to the tutor's role as teacher and subject expert. In particular, it is shown how tutors acted to 'discipline' students' understandings – shaped and directed students' formulations of topics towards appropriate positions within a discipline. It is argued that tutors' actions can be read as serving simultaneously to enable and constrain students' understanding.

Success in shaping and directing students' understanding, was viewed by both staff and students as requiring a supportive group climate in which students can feel able to explore their own uncertainties. Creating a climate of safety and avoiding acting towards individual students in face-threatening ways were seen by the tutors as key matters. However, tutors sometimes faced dilemmas when the goal of challenging a student's current understanding of a topic conflicted with the perceived duty not to threaten a student's public face of competence. These dilemmas draw attention to the fact that tutoring involves the need to make moral decisions. It cannot be viewed as solely a 'technical' matter of applying appropriate teaching techniques and group-facilitation tactics.

As students moved into the later years of study there was a distinct change both in their experience of tutorials and in the quality of discussion. Change in the quality of discussion was linked to an increase in subject knowledge and in knowledge of how to perform academic tasks appropriately. Key features of the practice of academic argument, which students were acquiring over the course of their academic career, are considered within the discussion chapter. It is made clear that acquiring full competence as a participant in academic discussions is a considerable accomplishment and one which goes well beyond developing oral communication skills.

This developmental progression in students' experience of tutorials raises issues for good practice which are discussed in Chapter 8. Issues for practice are also raised by the distinct division in student opinion on how debate should be structured. It is argued in Chapter 8 that there may be a need to reconsider some of the prescriptions for good tutoring practice which have been provided in the past.

How these broad issues presented in the preceding paragraphs were identified will emerge in the following chapters, starting with a description of the state of the field when this study began.

Chapter 2

Part One of the Literature Review: Research on Small Group Teaching

Introduction

The review of relevant literature which is presented in this present chapter has the conventional aim of placing the present study firmly within the context of previous work. To aid the organisation of the review, the discussion of literature has been divided into five distinct parts:

- key features of small group teaching and learning identified by advocates of the method ;
- general findings from research studies on small group teaching in higher education;
- research on students' perceptions of small group teaching;
- theory and research on students' general purposes in, and styles of, learning (which raises questions concerning students' experience of tutorials);
- research on tutors' thoughts concerning the aims and practice of small group teaching.

To fulfil the aims of giving a broad view of small group teaching and of highlighting general issues rather than getting lost in detail, the research studies which are examined have been carefully selected. The grounds for selecting studies were: over and above the clear need to take appropriate account of any large-scale studies, perceived importance in the eyes of previous writers and my own judgement that particular studies offered interesting insights into small group teaching and learning.

Before setting out on the first part of the review, there is an important general observation that needs to be made. Gergen (1973) has drawn

attention to the historically contingent nature of theorising and research in social psychology. He argues that: "theoretical premises are based primarily on acquired dispositions. As the culture changes, such dispositions are altered, and the premises are often invalidated." (Gergen, 1973, p.309). This cautionary statement would also seem to be applicable to much educational research; and is of particular relevance to the current review, given that a number of the research studies on small group teaching referred to in this chapter took place at least two decades ago, when the whole context of higher education in the UK was considerably different from its current form. It needs to be recognised that the "acquired dispositions" exhibited by students and tutors in small groups in the early 1970s may have been somewhat modified as a result of changes over time both in higher education and in the general culture.

'Talking to learn': *the work of Abercrombie and her associates*

There was an upsurge of interest in small group teaching and learning during the period of the 1960s and 1970s, and an enthusiastic promotion of the benefits that were seen to flow from discussion activities. Advocates for the use of small group discussion in higher education stated that it provided a forum where 'active' learning could take place and critical thinking could be encouraged. It was claimed that discussions which were run in a non-authoritarian, facilitative manner would encourage students to think more independently and to gain more confidence in their own abilities and judgement.

The foremost pioneer in the use of small group methods in higher education was Jane Abercrombie; and her many writings over the course of a long career have been very influential in shaping both practice and the views of university teachers on how small group activities *ought* to be conducted. As a simple (quantitative) indication of her influence, the monograph that she produced in 1970, *Aims and Techniques of Group Teaching,* went through four editions by 1979; and a selection of her writings has just been issued in 1993 (Nias, 1993). Given her widespread and continuing influence, it seems appropriate to focus an account of the way in which advocates of small

group teaching have described its nature and aims, and set out guidelines for the successful implementation of these aims, on Abercrombie's work.

Perception and the limiting effects of our "assumptive worlds"

One of the strengths of Abercrombie's writings on the advantages and techniques of small-group teaching is that they draw on a clearly articulated and coherent view of the nature of learning. A central theme in Abercrombie's view of learning, (stemming in part from her own professional work as a biologist and the innovative medical teaching that she conducted with medical students in the 1950s), was the active, projective and subjective nature of human perception. In using the term 'projective' to describe perception, Abercrombie was referring to the way in which an observer "contributes ideas or imaginings of his own according to the schemata that operate at the time" (Abercrombie, 1960, p.38). This emphasis on what an observer is actively contributing from his or her past knowledge to present acts of perceiving was prompted by her experience of teaching medical students which had made her acutely aware of the inhibiting effect that prior knowledge could have on fresh learning. She noted that after instruction in how to go about a particular task of scientific observation, students "tend to see what they expect to see whether it is there or not. ... the more complicated the specimen is and the more unfamiliar, the more its picture [drawn by the student] looks like the book" (Abercrombie, 1960, p.83). For Abercrombie the "dilemma of teaching" lay in "how to tell students what to look for without telling them what to see" (ibid.).

On Abercrombie's view prior knowledge, in the form of schemata, derived much of its inhibitory power over current learning efforts from the simple fact that we very often have no conscious awareness of our own assumptions. She makes this point vigorously, for example, in a 1953 article where she argues that "for the educationist a significant thing about assumptive worlds is that they are built up largely in an unconscious, non-rational, non-intellectual way" (Johnson, 1953)[1]. Elsewhere, she points to the importance of becoming aware of the factors which control our current behaviour – seeing a greater awareness of determinants of our behaviour as

[1] Abercrombie also published under the name of Johnson.

allowing us not only more control over our actions but also "making our judgements more "objective" " (Johnson, 1955 , p.393).

Abercrombie did not simply diagnose the obstacles that unconsciously held assumptions and egocentric perception might place in the way of objective interpretation, judgement and the acquisition of scientific knowledge. She also offered a remedy. Clearer perception and more objective judgement might come from comparing our own ways of framing the world with those of our peers. In her own words:

> we can study our own assumptive world by comparing it with somebody else's, for no two people have exactly the same assumptive world. When we have become aware of what assumptions we are making we are in a better position to change them if they do not lead to effective action. It is the aim of free group discussions to make this possible.
> (Johnson, 1953)

Encouraging a 'permissive atmosphere'

As well as providing this clear aim for group discussion of clarifying and widening out students' perceptions and judgements, Abercrombie provided a well constructed rationale for giving these "free group discussions" a fairly loose structure and a "permissive atmosphere" (Johnson, 1953). The following quotation presents some of her arguments for the importance of a "permissive atmosphere" and a loose structure to discussion, and brings out the close connection she sees between these two features of discussion:

> A permissive atmosphere is essential because people must not be allowed to feel afraid of making fools of themselves by exposing the irrationality of their thinking and feeling. They must feel free to talk in a spontaneous, even incoherent and random manner, so that assumptions can be brought to light and their usefulness examined.
> (Johnson, 1953)

Abercrombie can be seen to be arguing here then for a "permissive atmosphere" on the grounds that it is essential that individuals feel safe from the threat of losing 'face' in front of their peers. She also highlighted another reason for the provision of this atmosphere of freedom and safety. A guiding theme in her writings was that " the transmission of information" and "the modifying of attitudes" went hand in hand (Johnson, 1953). She

pointed out how knowledge and attitudes could be seen to be continually interacting (ibid.). For Abercrombie, intellectual development entailed 'emotional' work and potential anxiety, not just 'cognitive' efforts. She observed that:

> The more important the new information is and the more changes its assimilation demands, the more difficult it is to accept it, the greater is the incentive to refuse to act on it, and instead to go on in the old way. Change itself is bound to be associated with anxiety, ...
> (Johnson, 1953)

Again the "free group discussion" is seen as providing a remedy for barriers to intellectual change: "In the permissive atmosphere of free group discussions anxiety can be expressed and then allayed by the supporting action of the group" (ibid.).

Changing the "authority-dependency" relationship

In this "permissive", supportive, atmosphere where the focus is on the exchange of ideas between peers, Abercrombie believed that it was possible to achieve change in what she described as the "authority-dependency" relationship. Students working within this group climate could be weaned from dependence on a figure of authority and develop as autonomous learners (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978).

The role of the tutor

To further the aims of developing clear perceptions, objective judgement, critical thinking and autonomy in learning, the tutor's main task, according to Abercrombie, was "to establish a climate in which all participants can listen and speak" (Nias, 1993, p.117), to be socially reassuring and to encourage spontaneous expression by the students (Abercrombie, 1960, p.76). She saw the teacher as largely taking the role of a listener and not of a speaker; and described how she herself avoided correcting mistakes in an explicit manner "unless they were very dangerous ones" (Abercrombie, 1960, p.76). In some of her writings she stressed that tutors need to have faith in the ability of students to take on management and control functions in the group in addition to responsibility for engaged intellectual interaction. This does not mean, however, that she saw the tutor facilitating a "free group

discussion" as having little function or as adopting a completely laissez-faire position.

Abercrombie's position on the type of authority that a tutor could and should claim is perhaps most clearly revealed in her reaction to the thoughts of Stenhouse, (another early advocate of small group work), on this topic. Stenhouse saw small groups as providing a particularly suitable forum for the development of understanding (Stenhouse, 1972). Within small groups individual students could wrestle to gain personal understanding of a topic *and* try out their personal understanding against public criteria. Stenhouse believed that successful small groups were likely to be formal rather than informal in their organisation, by which he meant that they required "rules and conventions" to allow smooth and focused interaction and the testing out of understanding. Part of the set of conventions that Stenhouse saw as necessary for effective group functioning and pursuit of its tasks was the clear definition of the tutor's role. In the fourth edition of *Aims and Techniques of Group Teaching*, (Abercrombie, 1979, p.48) Abercrombie quotes with evident approval the following statement by Stenhouse:

> The teacher will be most effective if he defines his role and thereby makes his use of authority also rule-governed, and his area of initiative clear. Small group work is not forwarded by the renunciation of authority, but by its definition.

Elsewhere in her writings Abercrombie shows a clear recognition that it may not be a straightforward matter to achieve this clearly defined, and thereby considerably circumscribed, role for the tutor in day-to-day practice. In reporting on a project which had as its "central aim" bringing about a change in the authority-dependency relationship between students and tutor, Abercrombie and Terry noted that: "the teachers' struggle is that of being authoritative in their own disciplines, without being authoritarian in behaviour with students so that they can inform, guide and correct where necessary, but without confining or inhibiting the students' own learning activities." (Abercrombie and Terry 1978, p.155). Later parts of the review will return to look in more detail at the possible effects of asymmetries in knowledge and status between tutors and students and will consider the obstacles that may exist to bringing about the change in the "authority-dependency" relationship that Abercrombie argued for so vigorously.

This quite detailed exposition of Abercrombie's writings on what she described as "associative" or "free" group discussion has been given in recognition of the lasting influence that her work has had on how small group teaching is thought about, at least in British higher education. The detailed treatment that has been given of her work in the last few pages was also designed with other aims in view. It has introduced the themes that will be pursued throughout the remainder of this thesis, namely: the development of understanding through the exchange of views and the negotiation of meaning; group climate; emotional, 'subjective' aspects of learning; and questions concerning authority in educational settings. It was also necessary to take a careful look at Abercrombie's work to establish that the role she assigned to the tutor and the nature of the discussion she wished to encourage were designed to achieve a very *specific* set of learning aims. The final chapter of the thesis will argue that it may be appropriate to use small group teaching to pursue learning aims other than the ones identified by Abercrombie; and that in pursuing a rather different set of learning aims a tutor may need to adopt a more proactive role.

Before moving on to look at the direction that work on small group teaching has taken in more recent years, it is illuminating to set the efforts of Abercrombie and her associates within the context of wider developments in educational thinking at that time. The years that saw the rise of student discussion groups where a "permissive" atmosphere was emphasised also saw a "child-centred "view of education come into prominence and a belief in the power of "discovery learning". Walkerdine has commented on how the "centrepoint of such [child-centred] discourses was the production of a 'freedom' premised upon enabling the possibility of a natural sequence of development" (Walkerdine, 1988, p.7). She has also demonstrated that child-centred discourses and the move from overt to covert regulation: "produced the regulation of what natural child development meant, that is, they created a regime of truth within which readings were made and therefore what counted as correct was both made possible and validated" (ibid.). On a much more modest scale, the early advocates of small group discussion, while centring on the creation of freedom and the removal of obstacles to

developing understanding, at the same time can be seen to have produced a framework of ideas which has created "a regime of truth."

Continuities and changes in the description of small group teaching

Walkerdine's phrase "a regime of truth" has not been used lightly – as a self-indulgent rhetorical flourish – but with serious intent. The work of Abercrombie and her associates has had a lasting influence on how writers of texts on teaching methods have described the purposes and main features of small group teaching. A later section of the review will also outline the effect that Abercrombie's and other early work on small group teaching has had in forming the interests and preconceptions of researchers into small group teaching.

Almost all writing on small group teaching in the past few decades has stressed the importance of encouraging active participation on the part of students and a disciplined control by the tutor of the extent and nature of her or his contributions to the discussion. Central emphasis has also been given by many writers to the creation of a 'safe' group atmosphere in which students will experience the freedom to debate issues. However, not all of the proponents of small group work have shared Abercrombie's belief in the efficacy of a loose, "free associative" structure for discussion (see Collier, 1985).

The early work on small-group teaching also sparked an interest in "tutor-less groups" (Powell, 1964; Powell, 1974) and in "syndicate methods", where a class was divided up into "syndicates" of four to eight students and the bulk of the work of the course was carried out on a co-operative basis by these syndicates, for a large part of the time in the absence of a tutor (Collier, 1966 , 1969; Fransson, 1976).

Although remaining true to the main thrust of Abercrombie's ideas, a subtle but important shift can be seen in the writings of later proponents of small group teaching. The global view of the conditions which would facilitate free discussion given in the work of pioneers such as Abercrombie has been replaced by a more 'bottom-up' view where more attention is given to particular tutoring skills and techniques for achieving engaged participation.

In other words, writing on small-group teaching has taken a more 'technical' turn and with it a certain shift in spirit to a concern with providing effective group management. A number of texts have provided tutors with very useful general guidelines and helpful advice on specific aspects of running small groups (e.g., Bligh, 1986; Bramley, 1979; Brown and Atkins, 1988; Jaques, 1984, 1991; Rudduck, 1978). These texts aim to assist tutors to clarify their purposes in small group teaching and to hone up their skills of questioning and of facilitating debate. Advice is given on: practical questions, how to conduct the initial meeting of a group, ways of evaluating day to day practice in small groups and many other matters. Several forms of small group teaching are also reviewed in these publications and a variety of ways of stimulating discussion suggested. Most of these writers have stressed the importance of the tutor establishing with the students clear ground rules for debate, and Rudduck (1978) has suggested the importance of clear and fairly formal 'contracts' which set out the respective responsibilities of tutors and of student participants. In addition to providing general advice and specific tips, a number of these texts (e.g. Bramley, 1979 and Jaques, 1984, 1991) present findings and theorising from the literature on group dynamics and therapeutic groups to alert their readers to the nature of group processes.

Small groups and the development of communication skills

In more recent years in Britain, the Conservative government's ideological drive to attempt to create an "enterprise culture" has had some impact on higher education. It has been firmly stated in government policy that one of the aims of higher education should be to "have closer links with industry and commerce and promote enterprise" (HMSO, Cmnd. 114, 1987). One of the chief results in higher education of this drive to promote "enterprise" has been a heightened interest in developing "transferable skills" in students during their undergraduate career – skills which will stand them in good stead in their future employment. Among the 'skills' that have been highlighted as of particular benefit to a student's future career are 'oral communication skills'; and there have been a considerable number of action research projects in recent years which have looked at ways of developing communication skills in small groups (Enterprise Bibliography No.4, 1994). Interest in the development of small group teaching and learning has thus

remained strong. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that there is nowadays at least the potential for more diversity between tutors in the aims that they see themselves as pursuing in small group work with students. There is now the possibility of continuing to focus on the humanistic ideal of the cultivation of judgement and acculturation into the ways of academic debate or of giving more attention to the utilitarian purpose of preparing students for the demands of the workplace. Given the possible tension that may now exist for tutors between these competing aims, it seemed important to explore with the tutors in this study how they reacted to the idea that more attention could be focused in tutorials on the task of improving students' oral "communication skills". Their thoughts on the matter of how they saw themselves developing students' communication skills in their own tutorials are reported in Chapter 7, The Tutors' Perspective.

General findings from research studies on small group teaching in higher education

Findings concerning the outcomes of small group teaching

Turning from an exposition of continuities and change over time in the way in which the proponents of small group teaching have described its aims and nature, the next few sections of the review will look at research findings on this form of teaching. It seemed appropriate to give shape to this part of the review by organising discussion under four content areas: research findings on the learning outcomes of small group-teaching; general findings on the nature of the interaction within small group teaching; research on students' perceptions of small group teaching; and research on tutors' thoughts concerning the aims and practice of small group teaching. Relevant theory and research on students' general purposes in, and styles of, learning will also be reviewed.

Looking first at research on the outcomes of small group teaching, studies providing robust evidence of the benefits of small group teaching have been thin on the ground and consequently this section of the review will be very brief. The aims of the early advocates of small group teaching to bring about qualitative change in the perceptions and judgements of students and of

personal growth towards autonomy are clearly not readily quantifiable and it is therefore not at all surprising that, in contrast to some other forms of teaching, there is a paucity of 'outcome' studies. As Shuttleworth (1992, p.77) observes:

> quantitative outcomes such as subject matter mastery, problem solving skills and knowledge retention [are] all more amenable to measurement than less tangible commodities like the humanistic qualities of a tutor, or a subtle change in the attitudes of a learner slowly becoming more discriminating or self directing.

The reports that Abercrombie herself wrote on the considerable number of small group projects with which she was involved provide some indication of the higher-order intellectual gains which may be achieved. In particular she gives accounts of students' increasing ability to distinguish between "descriptive statements" and "inferences" (Abercrombie 1960, Abercrombie, 1979). An early study by Abercrombie and her associates (James, Johnson, and Venning, 1956), for example, involved a three year comparative study of the reasoning of anatomy students attending an "associate group discussion" with the reasoning of a control group of students. It was found that the group with discussion experience were better at distinguishing between facts, descriptive statements, and inferences; and made fewer false inferences. Members of the discussion group also more frequently considered alternative inferences than the control group; and they were less likely to make inferential statements without providing supporting evidence.

Observational studies of small-group teaching

Although the outcome studies reviewed in the preceding paragraph suggest that small-group teaching can be an effective means of promoting 'higher-order' thinking, a more negative picture emerges from the admittedly limited number of structured observational studies that have been conducted of tutor-led small groups. In examining these observational studies of small-group teaching, it is important to bear in mind the general limitations of structured observation as a research method. A particularly serious limitation of the method is that categories are decided in advance and so limit what aspects of small-group teaching can be observed and described.

Use of structured observation also confines attention to those aspects of small-group teaching which can be readily quantified.

A central, common, aim of observational studies of small-group teaching has in fact been to compare the quantity of contributions made by tutors and by students. A consistent picture has emerged across these studies of discussion being 'dominated' by tutor talk, with relatively low levels of student participation. For example, Baumgart (1976) in a study of 29 different tutorial groups found that tutors accounted for some 35% of the talk (defined in terms of moves) and 35% of the lines of typescript. The coding system that he employed in this study divided both student and tutor moves into the four categories of: structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting. Looking at the percentage of responses that fell into the each of these four categories, Baumgart found that:

> tutor and student roles were complementary. Tutors accounted for a high proportion of structuring and soliciting moves but students dominated responding and reacting moves. Tutors accounted for more than a third of the total talk and exercised considerable control over the tutorial discussion (Baumgart, 1976, 309-310).

Baumgart also noted the existence of distinct differences between tutors in their behaviour, and he identified six different "tutor roles" which he termed: *reflexive judge, data input, stage setter, elaborator, probe,* and *cognitive engineer.* An individual tutor could be expected to play all of these six roles, but "some tutors did register high scores on one cluster and low scores on all others" (Baumgart, 1976, 311). In the *data input* role the tutor "tended to answer questions posed by the group" and spent a higher proportion of time informing and narrating. The *stage setter* set the scene for discussion, making frequent use of structuring and initiating moves. In addition to "frequent tutor elaborating" the *elaborator* also talked for extended periods. The *probe* made frequent moves to initiate discussion and solicit comments from students. Rather than give direct answers to student questions, someone acting in the *probe* role redirected questions and problems to the group. The *cognitive engineer* exercised considerable control over the topic that was being discussed, either directing the group to new topics or keeping it focused on the current topic of discussion. The *reflexive judge* showed a great deal of interaction with students and continually evaluated student contributions.

Their evaluations of student contributions "were both supportive and corrective" (Baumgart, 1976, p.312). Baumgart found that tutors who had high scores on the *reflexive judge* role and the *probe* role encouraged more reflective responses, what Baumgart refers to as "higher cognitive level processing", on the part of student participants than did the remaining tutors.

Baumgart's typification of tutor roles has the distinct merit of giving a clear characterisation of individual differences in their style of teaching while recognising variability in the responses of tutors. He recognises the different roles that they may play, rather than attempting to give a *single* summary description of the style of individual tutors. There is a clear hint in Baumgart's work then of the complexity and variability of the interactional style of individual tutors. In contrast to other writings on small group teaching where the accent is on the tutor "facilitating" and curbing her or his interventions, Baumgart's work would seem to point to the importance of the tutor adopting a more 'proactive' role, of interactively encouraging students to construct new understandings and of evaluating student attempts to wrestle with a topic. Later chapters of the thesis will highlight the benefits that may come from the tutor adopting such an engaged, 'proactive' role.

Foster (1981) in a study of 62 medical tutorials found a rather less marked 'imbalance' between tutor and student contributions to the discussion, than was evident in the Baumgart study. Averaged over the 62 sessions total teacher talk accounted for 59% of the verbal interaction; and Foster found that "over 28 percent of the class time was spent in active teacher-student interaction" (Foster, 1981, p.833). (It is not clear, however, exactly how the term *active* teacher-student interaction was defined and operationalised.) Given that it has been claimed by some writers (e.g. Karp and Yoels, 1976) that there are many silent students in university classes, one of Foster's findings on the distribution of participation across students is of interest. She found that "all but four of the 119 students participated verbally in one way or another in the small groups during the quarter in which they were observed" (Foster, 1981, pp. 833-834).

In addition to noting the relative quantity and type of student and tutor interactions, Foster's coding system categorised the "cognitive level" of tutor

and student contributions, using Bloom's (1976) hierarchy of six cognitive levels for describing any verbal communication. Bloom's hierarchy attempts to distinguish the extent to which information has been actively processed and 'integrated' by an individual. The lowest of the six cognitive levels, *knowledge*, where there is only a simple presentation of facts is followed by *comprehension* of what these facts mean and then their *application* to particular situations: and succeeded by the higher cognitive levels of *analysis, synthesis* and *evaluation*.

Coding student and tutor talk into these cognitive levels revealed a somewhat disappointing picture. Looking at the student talk for all of the tutorials, 76.5% was only at the knowledge level and 18.8% at the level of comprehension. The three higher levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation accounted for only 2% of the students' discussion. Turning to the teachers' questions, about two-thirds (67.2%) were at the knowledge level, 21.8% at the comprehension level and only 3.3.% of their questions were situated in the three higher levels.

Although these reported mean values on the intellectual 'level' of student and tutor talk appear to give a negative view of the quality of talk achieved within this particular institution, Foster does note variability in the amount of higher cognitive level talk across her sample of tutorials; and presents evidence to show that the 'level' of student discussion "depended considerably on the cognitive level of the teacher's questions" (Foster, 1981, p.834). The teachers who asked the greatest number of higher level questions also appeared to differ from those who asked fewer high level questions in a number of other respects. They used more probing statements, gave greater encouragement to students and made more use of the students' own ideas. Foster concludes from her findings that "students would respond with a more analytic discussion if the teacher made a conscious effort to use higher level discussion and questions" (Foster, 1981, p.836).

A cautionary note needs to be sounded concerning studies, such as Foster's, which attempt to quantify the cognitive level of utterances within small-group teaching. In the absence of any known norms for what is a typical ratio of low/high cognitive level utterances in academic settings, 'common-

sense' judgements have to be made as to what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate ratio. Care needs to be exercised in making such common-sense judgements. Even in a piece of academic writing, the proportion of 'higher cognitive' level statements may be somewhat lower than is sometimes assumed. In a typical journal article reporting a piece of research a lot of information and exposition *has* to be given. Such an article is not concerned solely with *analysis, synthesis* and *evaluation.*

A recent large scale study using structured observation techniques was carried out by Luker (1989). She analysed the talk in twenty small group classes drawn from across six faculties of an English university. The analysis involved the use of a structured observation system which employed the following seven "categories" for coding talk: teacher lectures, explains, etc.; teacher questions; teacher responds; student responds; student volunteers; silence; unclassifiable. Her study also gathered written comments from both students and tutors on small-group teaching. (These comments will be examined later in the chapter.) In common with the two other studies which have been reviewed, Luker found that tutors talked for most of the time – the "average of total student talk" was 33%. There was also considerable variability across groups in the sample, with a very large range from students contributing only 8% of talk in an education methods class to students accounting for 68% of the talk in an education theory class. A 'common-sense' assumption often encountered is that more student participation might be expected in discursive social sciences and arts subjects than in small-group teaching in the physical sciences. An interesting finding of Luker's study was that the variation in the amounts of student talk across the different classes sampled did not seem to be related to, or explicable in terms of, academic discipline.

Looking at the nature of the interaction between tutors and students, Luker found that "lecturers do lecture, explain, narrate more than any other single activity in the group" (Luker, 1989, p.129). A note of caution needs to be expressed, however, over this statement by Luker. The summary category, teacher lectures, explains etc., used in her analysis may possibly encompass a fairly wide range of different 'teaching' actions; and it is not clear the extent to which "lecturing" was driven by the tutor's' own preoccupations or produced in response to student demand or need. This lack of necessary

precision in defining the meaning of observation categories is a considerable methodological weakness.

Luker also found that there was little questioning by tutors, "and of that only 20% elicits analysis or evaluation" (ibid., p.132). Turning to look at student talk, this study revealed that, with the exception of a few groups, "students do not often interact with each other in instructional small groups." (ibid., p. 149). Luker saw these, and other, findings on the nature of talk in small groups as indicating a clear gap between the aims that tutors expressed for small group teaching and their day-to-day practice.

Higher levels of student talk were observed, however, in those classes where students had been required to prepare beforehand and where groups had a carefully specified, clearly defined, form and task. Luker also found that the "experience level of students correlates with increased student participation in small groups" (ibid., p. 149). The majority of the classes where there was a higher level of talk were composed of final year students or of postgraduates. Luker draws attention here then to differences in the *quantity* of talk of final year versus first year students. A central theme of the analysis and discussion in the present thesis is an exploration of the possible reasons for differences in the *nature* and *quality* of discussion that can be observed between first year groups and final year groups.

Observational studies and prescriptions for remedying low levels of student participation

Luker uses the findings from her study to argue strongly for the need to develop staff skills in the area of small-group teaching. Most of the writers on small-group teaching share a similar belief that the remedy for most of the problems in small groups lies in increasing academics' understanding of this form of teaching and in developing their expertise. Consequently the texts on small group teaching reviewed earlier in this chapter have provided general advice and tips on particular aspects of running small groups.

In addition to the general advice given in these texts on teaching, very *specific* suggestions concerning changes that might improve the performance of tutors have come from a number of research studies. Crick and Ralph (1980),

for example, note the "very large percentage of occasions on which the teacher repeats or re-words an answer" (p.49). While they recognised that some paraphrase is desirable, they believed that tutors "ought to look critically at such practices" (ibid.). It will be argued in Chapter 3 that certain types of paraphrase can be of key importance in leading students into the language and forms of thinking of a discipline; and that Crick and Ralph were unwise to dismiss in such a sweeping fashion the practice of paraphrasing students' comments.

The prescription that Ralph and Crick make about the use of paraphrase statements might be viewed as an example of a deficit model of tutor actions that has been prevalent in much of the research on small group teaching. Guided by the assumption that small group teaching should be marked by high levels of student participation, researchers have tended to see situations where tutors spend a lot of time talking, or where they play too 'active' a role, (such as in paraphrasing, controlling a student's language), as evidence of deficiencies and the need for reform. Rather than starting off from an assumption that certain tutor actions display deficits, it might be appropriate to consider in a more analytical and reflective manner the possible functions that tutors might be pursuing in using certain forms of language and types of interaction with students. Chapter 4, on Methodological Issues and Procedures, will describe the attempt made in the present thesis to be an "impartial sympathetic observer" (Dewey, 1932; Hansen, 1993) and to avoid being driven by a 'deficit model' view of tutor and student actions.

Returning from this important methodological point to the current theme of particular suggestions for improving small group teaching that have been made by researchers, Geoffrey Beattie's (1981, 1982) analysis of talk in tutorials led him to suggest that "some of the 'trivial' aspects of everyday behaviour" (Beattie, 1982, p.148) might need to be changed if tutors were to move towards achieving "free and equal discussions" (Beattie, 1982, p.150). Beattie's research on small-group teaching is unusual in that it was concerned with providing a very precise, 'micro' account of specific features of interaction such as exchanges of turn, and interruptions. His research also gave attention to the role of gaze and other 'non-verbal' factors. In common with the structured observational studies that were reviewed earlier in the chapter, Beattie noted the pivotal role of the tutor and recognised it derived

in part from "students' perception of the tutor as the central fund of knowledge. Students direct their contributions towards the tutor for assessment and reward, where appropriate." (Beattie, 1982, p.148). However, he also observed that quite mundane features of interaction might also be maintaining the tutor in this pivotal role. For example, one aspect of interaction which he identified as possibly being of importance was seating arrangements where "students cannot direct their contributions at another student since he or she will be sitting at too close a distance for eye-contact" (Beattie, 1982, p.148). The "trivial" features of interaction which Beattie suggested were of particular importance in maintaining the tutor's dominant role were twofold. Firstly tutors tended to respond quickly to students' comments and did not tolerate even short silences in the discussion. Secondly, tutors in his study often interrupted, by overlapping, a student's contribution thus taking the initiative away from the student.

Beattie argued from his findings that tutors should be encouraged "to tolerate some short delays between contributions in tutorials" (Beattie, 1982, p.150) and needed to focus on "the habitual behaviours which comprise their tutorial technique" (ibid.). Although the suggestion that tutors' current habitual behaviours are in need of reform can again be seen to be driven by a deficit model view of tutors' actions, the quality and the clarity of the description that Beattie provides of the particularities of tutorial interaction is not in dispute. His work points to the value of conducting a microanalysis of specific features of interaction to complement the studies, reviewed earlier, which have provided a very general picture of the nature of student-tutor interaction.

The observational studies reviewed in the last few pages, including Beattie's work, have given us a much clearer picture of the *processes* of interaction in day-to-day small group teaching; but they have given little attention to the *content* that is being discussed in specific tutorials and to the *forms* of discourse that are being employed. Chapter 3 will highlight the importance of not restricting attention to the processes of turn-taking and interaction, and point up the need to consider the form and function of the language that is used in academic discussion groups.

Although the main thrust of research work on small group teaching has concerned itself with identifying 'problems' in tutors' practice and with suggesting remedies for these problems, there has also been a clear recognition that the source of some of the difficulties in small group teaching lies more with the students than the tutor. For example, a theme that has run through much of the literature on small-group teaching (e.g. Abercrombie and Terry, 1978) has been the deleterious effect on discussion of poor preparation by students. Although inadequate preparation by students can seriously limit the quality of discussion that is achieved, Jackson and Prosser (1985) wisely remind us that "this is not a problem solely of small group teaching. It is usually not obvious so long as the lecturer lectures and the tutor talks." (Jackson and Prosser, 1985, p.659). Another commonly identified problem is a lack of 'balance' between students in the amount of contribution that they make to the discussion, with possibly only a few students within the group doing most of the talking. A number of studies suggest that uncertainty about their role and anxiety about participation may be particularly acute in the early stages of students' experience of small group learning (Powell, 1974; Miles, 1981; Jackson and Prosser, 1989). Acknowledging the difficulties that some students experience in participation and in understanding the aims of small-group teaching, particularly in the early stages of their academic career, some writers have argued that students, as well as staff, require training in 'small group skills' (Stenhouse, 1972; Rudduck, 1978). Stenhouse, for example, vigorously asserts that: "The problem of developing satisfactory small group work depends as much on student training as on teacher training" (Stenhouse, 1972).

Providing students with explicit, well-structured, training in group work might well bring about considerable improvement in the quality of discussion. However, some caution needs to be expressed over the amount of improvement that it is reasonable to expect from giving students a training in small group work. At the same time as they are learning how to interact constructively with their peers in a small group, entrant undergraduates are also faced with the task of learning to practise a particular discipline. They have to discover what is seen to be appropriate

discourse within that discipline and master the accepted, 'warranted', ways of debating a point. Although group-work skills can be taught in an explicit, straightforward, manner; learning to practise the discipline is more likely to be acquired over time by observation of tutors' and lecturers' actions, by tutors shaping student responses, and by feedback on written work.

Most writing on small group teaching has focused firmly on the matter of facilitating student participation within groups, and there has been relative neglect of the task that undergraduates face of learning to debate within a particular discipline. Rudduck (1978, p.13), however, did give a passing recognition to the matter of acculturating students to the practices of a discipline. She noted that a major difficulty for students in discussion work is "becoming proficient in the language of their discipline" and that a tutor or lecturer can act as a "language model" (Rudduck, 1978, p.13). She then observed how:

> It would be unfortunate therefore if in their first term a system of tutorless small groups were organised on the grounds that students will talk more comfortably when the staff member is not present. This may be so .., and the dilemma then is whether confidence in talking in an informal register will facilitate the acquisition of the appropriate academic register at a later stage, or whether early familiarity with the sound and structures of the academic discourse is a better basis for confident participation in formal discussion work.
> (ibid.)

There is at least an implicit recognition here then of the tension that can exist between facilitating participation and 'disciplining' students' talk. A more extended discussion of the possible tension between these purposes will be provided in the second part of the literature review and in the analysis of findings from the present study. The following section of the review will also present comments, gathered by previous researchers, from students on how their knowledge of a discipline affects their participation.

Research on students' perceptions of small group teaching

Given that a central focus of this present thesis is the investigation of student views of tutorial teaching, it is appropriate to look in some detail at past research on how students perceive and react to this type of teaching. There is not a large body of work which gives a direct reporting of students' comments on small group teaching; but there are four very useful sources which will be examined in this section of the review. The four sources are: student comments gathered by Abercrombie and her associates in the course of their many projects, and in particular from *Talking To Learn* (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978); material gathered from interviews with students presented by Rudduck (1978) in *Learning Through Small Group Discussion;* written comments collected by Luker as part of her 1989 study; and findings from Shuttleworth's (1992) three year longitudinal interview study of "talkative" and "silent" students.

These four sources have different strengths and each illuminates a particular facet of students' reported experience of tutorial groups. Luker's research provides a clear but thin overview of students' general 'likes' and 'dislikes'. Rudduck's work gives a valuable account of some of the aspects of small group work which students view as problematic. As one might expect, Abercrombie's writings look at how students view 'authority' and more generally give insights into the tensions that exist within students' views of tutorials. Shuttleworth's thesis draws attention to the differences that exist between students in their purposes within, and perceptions of, small group teaching.

Students' likes and dislikes and perceptions of tutors' aims

In addition to her observational work, Luker gathered written comments from fifty students and from tutors. Students were asked to provide open comments under four main headings. The first heading asked for their perceptions of what the tutor was aiming to achieve in the class that Luker had observed and the second heading inquired "In what ways did the small group teaching situation help to achieve these things?" They were then asked to list the things they enjoyed about being taught in a small group and their dislikes.

Luker found that students' "perception of their lecturers' aims for the classes related accurately to the expressed intentions of the lecturers" (Luker, 1989, p.96). Students' statements concerning their tutors' aims fell into a number of distinct general themes. *Increasing students' understanding* was the most commonly mentioned aim that staff were seen to be pursuing in small group teaching, followed by the belief that tutors wished to use small group discussions as *an opportunity for personal involvement and for communication.* Students also indicated that they saw some members of staff as having the aim of *encouragement of students to think and form opinions.* Members of one particular group from Mechanical Engineering thought that their tutor had the purposes of giving *individual attention and assessment of knowledge and skills.* Occasional reference was made to tutors using *small groups as extension of lectures.*

Luker's findings indicate that staff appeared to be communicating their general aims in small-group teaching clearly to their students; but her work does not show the extent to which the students shared their tutors' aims. Students within her study did, however, mention what they saw as distinct advantages of tutorials, such as the *facilitation of individual expression of ideas* and the value of *direct contact with the lecturer.* Under the theme of the usefulness of *direct contact with the lecturer* Luker notes a number of comments from students who appreciated being made to take part in the discussion. For example, one individual noted that: "Direct questioning forces thought processes"(Luker, p.98). Students wrote about the importance of an *informal, intimate and secure atmosphere* within small groups and the ways in which this atmosphere supported their learning. Some students drew a contrast between the relaxed, enabling atmosphere that prevailed in small groups and the more formal and inhibiting nature of lecture classes. Included among the student comments under the general theme of *informal, intimate and secure atmosphere* is an interesting one which draws out the way in which the feelings of security that come from the availability of tutor support may in fact assist students to take responsibility for their learning. "It is easier for students to be more sure of themselves when they know they have to take charge of the situation, but that there is help available if they request it." (Luker, 1989, p.97).

A small number of students also appreciated the fact that small group teaching allowed the opportunity for *collaborative working*, with academic staff as well as their peers. In the words of one of the respondents: "We are able to talk through the problem and reason together, so that we understand why a certain conclusion is reached." (Luker, 1989, p.98).

Turning to the 'likes' that students expressed about small group teaching, a considerable number could in fact have been categorised under the theme, that Luker identified from responses to an earlier question, of *facilitation of individual expression of ideas*. They welcomed the opportunity that small groups provided for discussion and interchange of ideas and for personal involvement. Another category of 'likes' consisted of comments where the students recognised the value of small group teaching for the development of their learning in general and understanding of a subject. The following quote is an example of a comment from this category: "Helps develop your power of analysing problems and arriving at solutions." (Luker, 1989, p.100).

Looking at other expressed 'likes', some students described the greater "flexibility" of small group teaching, in comparison to other teaching methods, as a distinct advantage. "I like the flexibility of a small group. We aren't bound to a rigid schedule." (Luker, 1989, p.99). The feelings of a sense of belonging that a small group could give were also mentioned under the category of 'likes'. One student remarked on how: "By being in a smaller group, one feels part of the class rather than just another face in a sea of faces. I actually feel more part of the university as a whole." (Luker, 1989, p.100). Small group teaching was contrasted in a favourable manner with lectures: "It can actually be enjoyable. Lectures rarely are." (Luker, 1989, p.99).

Luker received fewer comments in the section of her response sheet which asked for student dislikes. Most students replied "none". Frequently expressed dislikes were: "problems with dominant personalities" (Luker, 1989, p.101), situations where members of the group were reluctant to talk and a discomfort with silences. In contrast to the students who reported being made to participate as a positive feature of small group teaching, several students wrote of their dislike of being involved, for example, "Being asked to contribute, when you don't want to" (Luker, 1989, p.101). The direct

contact with tutors that came with small group work was also seen by some as threatening and as exposing them to the risk of evaluation, as the following comment demonstrates: "A feeling of being assessed by the lecturer through your answers and through your attitudes." (Luker, 1989, p.101). (The topic of concern about evaluation with its attendant threat to students' sense of their public competence, raised in Luker's study, will be pursued in the second part of the literature review.)

There appears to be an implicit assumption in much of the writing about small group teaching that if the right conditions are provided along with interesting material for discussion, students will be motivated to prepare and to participate. However, the responses that several students provided under Luker's heading of dislikes suggest that it would be unwise to assume that all students will be motivated to work for, and in, small groups. The fact that they had to do some work for tutorials was mentioned as a dislike by a number of respondents.

Luker's work gives a clear, recently published, overview of students' thoughts on some aspects of small group teaching; and certain of the themes that are raised by student comments that she presents are pursued in the analysis of student interviews within this present study. However, the picture that she presents is not rich in detail and gives a fairly 'static' view of student perceptions. Given the distinct limitations of the method that was adopted in this study of gathering written comments under a few simple headings, this lack of detail and depth of analysis is hardly surprising. For a fuller picture of student perceptions of small group teaching there is a need to turn to the earlier work of Rudduck (1978) and of Abercrombie and her associates. Their work gives a clear sense of the difficulties that students may experience in discussion groups and of the tensions that may exist in the way that some students react to small group work.

Rudduck's (1978) reporting of students' experience of small group teaching

Looking first at Rudduck's work, her 1978 monograph *Learning Through Small Group Discussion* presents a considerable quantity of student comments on their experience of small group teaching, albeit in a very scattered manner. Responses were collected from first year and from final year

students by a variety of methods: interviews with twelve first year students, reports gathered from small group sessions where the topic was the working of the group itself and questionnaires given to a group of first years who had been involved for a whole term in a training programme for small group work. A major strength of Rudduck's work is that she uses student interview data and observations to give a very clear account of the problems that undergraduates, particularly first years, state that they encounter in small group work. She summarises the problems that students report experiencing under four headings: *making a contribution, understanding the conventions, knowing enough to contribute,* and *being assessed* (Rudduck, 1978, p. 12).

Under the first heading of *making a contribution,* Rudduck presents the difficulties that students report in actually talking in discussion groups, particularly when they have had little past experience of this type of discussion (ibid., p.12). Some of the comments which Rudduck lists under the theme of factors affecting participation reveal students having difficulty coping with a new, possibly threatening, social circle as well as a new task. "You are thrown into a room with people you don't know and you sort of tend to be shy, you know, in coming out with problems and I suppose as you go through the course the seminar group will get better, providing it stays as one entity." (Rudduck, 1978, p. 17). Problems in participation may also result from anxiety and uncertainty about one's personal responsibility to contribute to the proceedings, as the following quotation illustrates:

> (The main problem in talking is) 'who's going to answer first, I would think, more than anything. All looking at each other to see who is going to say something, first. Relying on somebody else and nobody does, and by the time you sort of think of it you think "Oh it's too late now, you know; might as well keep quiet."'
> (Rudduck, 1978, p.17).

Another source of difficulty in *making a contribution* is brought out by the student who said: " I don't know why but anyway you can never get any positive reaction from the seminar group ...People don't just speak of their own accord unless they have a direct question because they don't like the other people to think that they are being clever." (Rudduck, 1978, p.17).

Difficulties that students have in making a contribution are often clearly linked to uncertainties about how one *ought* to conduct oneself in this new group teaching situation, to problems in what Rudduck describes as *understanding the conventions.* Rudduck lists a considerable number of matters about which students are uncertain. Amongst the most important of these matters are: "how far one should go in acknowledging confusion or misunderstanding – or whether in a higher education seminar there is a tacit agreement that one disguises uncertainty or ignorance and talks only from relative certainty." (Rudduck, 1978, p.14). In talking about "a tacit agreement" Rudduck draws attention to the fact that anxiety may arise from students' difficulties in deciphering the 'hidden' norms that guide action in small discussion groups. Aside from the need to develop a general sense of whether one can safely admit confusion or not, the student also has to learn to read the conventions that apply in *particular* discussion groups "given that seminar styles often differ from tutor to tutor" (Rudduck, 1978, p.14).

One aspect of small group teaching which Rudduck found could cause students to feel bewildered was the conventions concerning a student presenting a paper to the group. In addition to being unsure about what is required in such a paper, students were sometimes unclear about their role once they had finished presenting the paper. In Rudduck's own words: "is he one of the group, or does he share some responsibility for the management of the group with the seminar leader?" (Rudduck, 1978, p.14).

Under the heading *knowing enough to contribute* Rudduck notes that: "Students frequently attribute their reticence in discussion to sheer uncertainty about the agenda" (Rudduck, 1978, p.15). Lacking a clear statement of the topic under discussion, students are not sure about what would count as a relevant contribution. Rudduck also draws attention to students' concern about the amount of knowledge that they require in order to take part in discussion. Another difficulty listed under the heading of *knowing enough to contribute* is the sense of inadequacy that students report "when the seminar leader sets a style of fairly aggressive intellectual challenge." (ibid.). As "one way through the knowledge dilemma" (ibid.), Rudduck presents some practical ideas on how tutors can attempt to ensure that students in a particular group share a common ground in preparation.

Slightly later in the book, Rudduck lists a series of first year student comments on small group teaching, some of which are relevant to this theme of *knowing enough to contribute.* Included among the list of student comments is the following quotation: "The point is we don't know enough really to answer back and do much talking ourselves" (Rudduck, 1978, p.19). Rudduck herself does not provide any interpretation of this statement; but two contrasting readings could be given of this statement. One reading would focus on the student's *perception* of the situation, suggesting the need for a change of attitude on the part of the student towards greater confidence and a belief in the worth of her or his contributions. This reading fits well with Abercrombie's (and Rudduck's) conception of the task of the tutor as assisting the student to move towards autonomy and away from a view of the tutor-student relationship as one of "authority-dependency". An alternative reading is that the statement is an accurate perception of a situation where entrant students' lack of knowledge of a discipline does place severe constraints on their ability to participate, and there is a very real, and potentially inhibiting, asymmetry of knowledge between tutor and first year undergraduates. This theme of the effects of both real and perceived lack of knowledge of a discipline on discussion is one which will feature strongly in the presentation and discussion of findings in the present thesis.

Moving on to the fourth broad problem heading of *being assessed,* Rudduck highlights the fact that for some students their feelings of security and willingness to "take risks with ideas" may be threatened by the uncertainty that they feel about assessment (Rudduck, 1978, p.15). Rudduck also reports that for some students worries about assessment may not be limited to anxiety about displaying lack of 'academic' knowledge. They may have the wider concern that their values are being judged and may be found wanting (ibid.).

At a later point in her monograph Rudduck presents an edited transcript of a discussion with six final year students on small group teaching (Rudduck, 1978, pp. 63-70). It is interesting to observe that at least some of the matters which Rudduck notes under the four broad headings of *making a contribution, understanding the conventions, knowing enough to contribute,* and *being assessed* are still a source of anxiety and difficulty for this, admittedly very small, sample of final year students. For example, knowing enough to contribute

and being able to make one's contribution in an appropriately 'academic' form remains a cause of concern for the following student who describes how: "It's all right when you're dealing with feelings or experiences but dealing with something in a seminar that's about something you've read, I find it difficult to talk on this critical, intellectual type basis."(Rudduck, 1978, p.69). Another student raises the problems that may arise from inadequate preparation and the concern not to lose 'face' within the group: "in a lot of seminars we're talking about things that you don't know very much about and you're supposed to have done some reading and you probably haven't so you're much more careful because you don't want to make a fool of yourself." (Rudduck, 1978, p.69).

In a similar manner to Rudduck, Abercrombie and Terry (1978) provide edited transcripts of a number of different discussions between a tutor and his or her students on the nature of small group teaching. The theme, (highlighted in the quotation from Rudduck in the preceding paragraph), of the problems that may arise from students' failure to carry out their responsibility to prepare features quite prominently in the student comments that Abercrombie and Terry present (e.g., Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, pp. 15-17). The inhibiting effects of the fear that you might "make a fool of yourself", that you might say the 'wrong' thing also emerges in the discussions presented by Abercrombie and Terry as a very salient concern for students. For example, one student talked of how: "I think lots of times people have the idea in their minds, but are scared to express it in case they express it wrongly." (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.55). It would appear from some of the student comments reported by Abercrombie and Terry that inhibiting fears about potential loss of public face were not limited to the 'shy' members of tutorial groups. They quote a student, described as being a very active member of his group, who talked about his difficulty in admitting a lack of understanding in the following terms:

> in a semi-public situation, to admit that you don't understand something or to make a slight fool of yourself – that is a very different situation because you do leave yourself open to attack. Well it might be the mildest form of attack, but you are under some sort of attack if you admit that you don't quite understand.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.55).

In addition to giving a fairly fine-grained picture of the sort of difficulties that students report experiencing in small groups, some of the quotations from students presented by Rudduck and by Abercrombie give a sense of how they view the tutor's responsibilities and authority. However, given that both Abercrombie and Rudduck were reporting the discussion that took place within particular small groups, some caution does need to observed about how representative the comments presented in the next few paragraphs are of wider student opinion. Comments reported from one of the group discussion transcripts presented in Rudduck (1978) would seem to suggest a consensus among that particular group of students at least concerning the responsibility of the tutor to provide some clear structure for the proceedings. For example, one student stated that: "A certain amount of planning must be necessary so that people can have something to latch on to and to argue about." Another participant, agreeing with the first student's statement, asserted that: "Yes, you have got to have some framework for the seminar to work on."

Student comments presented by Abercrombie and Terry (1978) would appear to indicate that the student respondents in that study also saw the structuring of discussion as the tutor's responsibility; but it is not possible to get a very clear sense from either Rudduck (1978) or Abercrombie and Terry (1978) of the *degree* and *type* of structuring which students saw as appropriate. There are, however, some examples of individual students reacting unfavourably to 'extreme' styles of tutorials, to the opposed styles of very little structure whatsoever or a tightly controlled, tutor-dominated discussion. A later section of the review on *Styles of learning and teaching* will return to the important topic of possible differences between students in the degree of structure and tutor control which they prefer.

Turning from the specific question of structure to students' general reactions to tutor control, Abercrombie and Terry summarise students' views in the following terms: "Students, of course, accept the view that the control of the direction of discussion, its pace, and allotment of time for contributions, is the teacher's job." (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.153). Earlier in the monograph they note also that students may expect their tutors to provide

them with an incentive to work (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.25). In line with their general aim of encouraging the movement away from dependency to greater autonomy, Abercrombie and Terry highlight ways in which "students may come to recognise their [own] potentialities for control" (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.153) and take greater responsibility for their learning.

Abercrombie and Terry state that some students involved in the *Talking to learn* project did indeed move towards accepting responsibility for their learning, a change which was also evident in an earlier project where students of Education over the course of a number of weekly discussions changed their perceptions of themselves as learners (Abercrombie, 1970). In documenting change away from an "authority-dependency" relationship, Abercrombie recognises that such a change may involve the need to resolve internal conflicts and feelings of uncertainty (Abercrombie, 1974; Abercrombie and Terry, 1978b).

From the statements made by architecture students in a series of associative small-group discussions which were specifically designed to encourage autonomous learning, Abercrombie and Terry identified a number of themes which capture the conflicts and feelings involved in moving away from the "authority-dependency" relationship (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978b). Among these themes were:

> the wish to remain dependent conflicting with the wish and need to become self-reliant; ..realistic fears of failure as a result of being independent, and fantasy fears of reprisals from rejected authorities; discomfort due to the lack of perceived structure; ..the exhilaration of feeling emancipated; recognition that it was possible to have and use internalised as distinct from imposed values
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978b, p.92).

It is clear from this list of themes which encapsulate students' expressed conflicts and feelings that the type of change in relationship to authority advocated by Abercrombie is not a trivial matter, but one which calls for considerable personal development. In addition, it is evident from Abercrombie and Terry's account that there were considerable differences between these architecture students in:- their reactions to the associative group discussions themselves, their willingness to use the discussions as a

vehicle of change and the extent to which their attitude to authority changed over the course of the sessions.

The statements made by two less enthusiastic participants focus attention on an ethical dilemma that may arise for forms of teaching that wish to bring about personal as well as intellectual development. One of the students was adamant that individuals should be able to choose whether to enter this type of learning environment, or not, and stated that: "I think that people ought to know beforehand, and forcing people to be free is the same as forcing them not to be free." (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978b, p.85). His comment was echoed by another student who said: "I think the problem with this present set-up is, it forces everyone to think it out for themselves, and possibly it's not the right time for that particular person" (ibid.). Besides pointing up a real dilemma, these student comments also serve as a reminder that even groups which set out to provide 'freedom to learn' may be experienced as oppressive by some students.

Shuttleworth (1992) – differing student perceptions of small group teaching

Reactions to tutor authority and differences between students in their perceptions of small group work are themes which also figure prominently in Shuttleworth's 1992 study. She carried out a three year longitudinal interview study on students' experiences of small group teaching, with an initial sample of 61 students, reduced to 40 students in the final year of the study. Shuttleworth's chief interest was in initially identifying "talkative" and "silent" students and tracking changes in their reported participation over time and reasons for these changes. Students were divided into various categories of "talkativeness" and "silence" according to their own self-report. There are some problems with the approach that Shuttleworth took in analysing her data. She recognised that there could be considerable situational variability in students' "talkativeness" or "silence"; but she did not take sufficient account of this 'individual/situation' variability in the analysis and interpretation of her findings. However, her work does provide a valuable developmental perspective on students' reactions to small group work and many interesting, individual insights.

Looking first at the broad trends which Shuttleworth found in students' reported participation, she discovered "that increasing participation is the most notable tendency across verbal types [i.e., talkative and silent]" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.426). Some students over the course of the three years also developed a greater sense of their own responsibility for the success of small group sessions, rather than laying all of the responsibility on the tutor. In the words of one student in Shuttleworth's study: "it's no use blaming the tutor or the subject if a course is bad, the students are the course" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.701). Shuttleworth sees this movement of some students towards an understanding of their own responsibilities as providing some support for Abercrombie's argument "that discussion can go some way to releasing students from a crippling dependency on tutors." (ibid.). At the same time, however, she notes that throughout the three years studied: "Most, silents and talkatives, place the onus to make things work squarely on the tutor's shoulders." (ibid.). Another developmental change which Shuttleworth documents is a certain decrease in student anxieties about how their contributions will be perceived and judged by their peers. In Shuttleworth's own words: "first year observations are more burdened with ideas of this kind than third year" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.440). Shuttleworth presents evidence which suggests that an increase in confidence about participation over time was linked for some students with greater subject knowledge and better preparation for classes in their third year.

Moving on to look at commonalties across years, rather than differences, Shuttleworth identified "concern with the role of the tutor" and how power was exercised as a common theme in student interviews (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.332). She observed how:

> students often talked, for example, of trying to impress the tutor, avoiding conflict, attempting to 'sus out' the right thing to say, feeling the effects of the tutor's power in being asked questions, and in an awareness that the tutor has different views to themselves.
> (ibid.).

In addition to highlighting student perceptions of tutor authority which inhibited or distorted their participation, Shuttleworth presented students' comments on tutor characteristics which made them more willing to

participate. Students described their preference for, and greater confidence in, small groups where the tutor provided an atmosphere of informality "and a level of closeness" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.510). They also commented favourably on tutors who were "approachable" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.536) and the importance of "tutor enthusiasm" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.537) in ensuring that the group meeting was a worthwhile experience.

Shuttleworth's study provides insight into the differences that existed between students in their purposes in, and conceptions of, small group teaching. For example, she noted how some students had what she described as an "instrumental orientation towards seminars" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.450). An example cited by Shuttleworth of this 'instrumental orientation' is a first year student who saw them as an opportunity for gathering information: "although you're not participating you can get a lot of information out of that .. like going through ways of answering essay questions .. and getting rough plans of how essays can be done" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.450).

In contrast to the students who display an instrumental orientation, Shuttleworth provides portraits of a number of students who value and enjoy discussion for its intrinsic interest. She describes these students as being "integrated into the system" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.718), as having a "ready acceptance of the values of the academic system, which in discussion terms can be said to appear as a willingness to enter into argument for argument's sake" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.683).

Turning from this distinction between students pursuing discussion for either its extrinsic or its intrinsic value to look at other areas, Shuttleworth draws attention to differences in perceptions and tactics of 'talkative' as opposed to more 'silent' students. For example, she describes how 'talkative' students give an account of their participation which suggests that they are more able and willing than 'silent' students to give a tactical response. The talkative, in contrast to the more silent, believe that they can steer discussion away from topics that might threaten to reveal their lack of knowledge and preparation (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.617).

An important difference between students in their perceptions of tutorials, captured by Shuttleworth, is the division between those who see them as a forum for co-operation and those who see them as calling for competition. As examples of these contrasting views of tutorials, one student interviewed by Shuttleworth talks of small groups as being "co-operative definitely. The whole idea of a seminar is to encourage and exchange ideas and organise ideas and I think you do that together by talking and exchanging views" (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.646). Whereas another student describes how: "I also like to compete with the group and make your argument the right one even if it's not.." (ibid.). Another student cited by Shuttleworth had a strong conception of discussion groups as being competitive: "Yes they are competitive, there's definitely a thrill of ... arguing your own train of thought" (ibid.). However, at the same time he had a clear-sighted appreciation of the constraints that were placed on the pursuit of competitive aims within academic debate: "But they're also co-operative as I said, in that you have to be fairly polite so that you don't dominate too much" (ibid.). The accent in the work of Abercrombie and subsequent writers on small group teaching has been on the importance of co-operation and of conflict serving communal rather than individual ends. Shuttleworth's findings serve as a useful reminder that not all students may share a conception of small groups as providing fora for co-operation.

As the last few paragraphs have demonstrated, Shuttleworth's focus on examining differences between students in their perceptions of, and reported actions in, small groups led her to a number of interesting findings. This concern with investigating differences between students in their purposes and what Abercrombie described as their "assumptive worlds" is continued in the next section of the chapter.

Insights from the literature on student learning

Additional insights concerning the possible determinants of student performance in tutorials, and the nature of their perceptions of small group teaching, are provided by the wider literature on student learning in higher education. It is not the intention of this section of the review to give a detailed or analytical treatment of the large body of literature on student

learning that has been produced in the last twenty years. The present purpose is to give a brief account of a few studies which can add clarity to our view of students' actions and purposes within small groups.

Conceptions of learning / students' intellectual development

A leitmotif of the student learning literature from the 1970s onwards has been that the manner in which students adapt to the demands of university life is powerfully mediated by their beliefs, conceptions and purposes. A particularly important influence on the way an individual sets about studying is the conception she or he has of the nature and purposes of learning. Investigations of qualitative differences in adults' conceptions of, and purposes in, learning and the effects of these differences have been pursued in a large number of studies (e.g.; Säljö, 1979; van Rossum and Schenk, 1984; Biggs, 1979; Biggs, 1987; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Volet and Chalmers, 1992). A much cited piece of work, which is of particular relevance to the present thesis, is the interview study conducted in 1979 by Säljö in which adults were asked what learning meant to them. Säljö identified from his respondents' accounts five qualitatively distinct conceptions of learning (Säljö, 1979). Learning was viewed as:

1 a quantitative increase in knowledge
2 memorising
3 the acquisition of facts, methods, etc. which can be retained and used when necessary
4 the abstraction of meaning
5 an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality.
(Marton and Säljö, 1984, p. 52)

In the first three conceptions there is a 'quantitative' view of learning where the accent is on the straightforward acquisition of discrete pieces of knowledge and on simply *reproducing* information. The last two conceptions imply the existence of a much more *active* learner – one who is engaging deeply with a text or a problem, incorporating new information with previous knowledge and achieving a satisfying personal sense of understanding. These different conceptions of learning have been found to have important effects – being associated with both qualitatively different

processes and outcomes of studying (van Rossum and Schenk, 1984; Marton and Säljö, 1984).

A similar interest in how students viewed learning and in the values which guided their construction of the world is evident in the longitudinal interview study that William Perry conducted at Harvard on students' general intellectual and ethical development (Perry, 1970). From the analysis of interview material Perry constructed a stage-type account of intellectual development with a sequence of nine positions through which students might progress during their years at college. Taking a synoptic view of Perry's account of development, students in the first position of his scheme exhibit what he describes as *dualistic thinking,* where there is a belief that there are right and wrong answers to all questions and an over-ready acceptance of the word of those in authority. They then gradually move to a more *contextual relativistic reasoning,* and some will progress to achieve *commitment* to carefully worked-out personal interpretations and values.

Whether one views students' conceptions of learning and their possession of a dualistic as opposed to a relativistic view of knowledge in terms of 'individual' differences, or on my own reading as indications of differences in the extent to which they have been acculturated into the practices of academic life, the research findings reviewed in the past few paragraphs bring into focus the fact that tutors and students may not always share a common goal. An individual student may wish to use discussion to get a clearer sense of what the "right answer" is to a particular problem, while the tutor may wish the group to move away from a dualistic view of this particular problem and of knowledge in general. The work of Säljö and Perry also points to the possibility of considerable differences *between* students in their conceptions of the intellectual purposes of discussion and hence of their goals in debate. In addition, Perry's work raises the matter of developmental changes in students' views of, and participation in, discussion. Those students who do progress during their undergraduate career through the sequence of intellectual development outlined by Perry could be expected to demonstrate a qualitative change in their views of the nature and purposes of small group teaching and debate with their peers.

Turning to another area of research that is relevant to the study of small group teaching, it has been established that there are distinct differences between individuals in their style of working through an academic task. Two persons working on the same task may achieve a comparable level of understanding, but reach this outcome by taking quite different routes through the material. Pask's research studies led him to draw a distinction between *holist* and *serialist* styles of learning (Pask, 1976a, 1976b, 1988). The holist sets out to learn new material by attempting to gain a broad overview of the topic, before focusing in on detail, and delights in analogies and illustrations. In contrast, the serialist prefers a fairly narrow focus on the material that is to be mastered, building up understanding in a step-by-step, logical manner. Pask has also identified another style of learning, termed *versatile*, in which individuals use either or both processes as appropriate to the specific task.

Problems may arise if there is a marked mismatch between the learning style of a student and the learning/teaching style of a lecturer or tutor. In considering the implications of Pask's work for teaching and learning in higher education, Entwistle remarks on how:

> If lecturers exhibit extreme lecturing styles, either holist or serialist, it seems inevitable that students with the opposite style will find those classes uncongenial and difficult. Yet lecturers are free to indulge their own stylistic preferences, however extreme, while students have to make the best of relative degrees of mismatch with their own preferences.
> (Entwistle, 1992, p.21)

It seems reasonable to suggest that a similar set of comments might apply to tutorial groups. Accordingly it appeared appropriate in this study to include student preferences for particular styles of structuring a tutorial among the topics for investigation.

The preceding sections of the review have considered the relevance that work on differences between students in their conceptions of learning and styles of learning may have for the study of tutorials. This concern with individual differences and their possible effects needs to be balanced, however, by an awareness of the effects that the wider institutional and departmental context may have on the conduct of tutorials *and* on students' perceptions of the value of this form of learning. In recent writings, Entwistle has stressed the need to take a "systems approach" to the study of learning and teaching in higher education, the assessment of the adequacy of teaching provision and the design of any innovation in higher education (Entwistle, 1992; Entwistle, Thompson and Tait, 1992). He has produced a heuristic model of learning and teaching in higher education as a system (Entwistle, Thompson and Tait, 1992) which "indicates how the approaches to, and the outcomes of, learning result from complex interactions between the characteristics of the students, the nature of the teaching, and the whole learning environment provided by the department and institution" (Entwistle, 1992, p.42).

The need to take a wide, integrative view of teaching and learning in higher education and to appreciate the complexity of the determinants of student actions and perceptions has perhaps not been sufficiently recognised in past work on tutorials. Attention has focused very tightly on small groups as a discrete form of teaching, and in general little consideration has been given to the way in which tutorials may be shaped by the wider learning system in which they are situated. It would be valuable to gain a sense of how students view matters such as: the links between tutorials and lectures, how other academic work demands may affect preparation for tutorials and the value of tutorials as a forum where problems in any area of course content could be explored. Accordingly all of these matters have been investigated in the present study and the relevant findings are reported in Chapter 6.

More generally, in the analysis of the transcripts of the student interviews there was an attempt to keep a vigilant watch for possibly quite subtle interactions between wider features of the learning environment, the purposes of individual students and their perceptions of tutorials. During

the planning, research and analysis stages of the present study there has been an attempt to avoid tunnel-vision and to consider the interconnections between tutorials and wider features of the higher education learning system.

Research on tutors' thoughts concerning the aims and practice of small group teaching

Moving on from students' perceptions of small group teaching and relevant insights from the literature on student learning to look at work on how tutors view discussion groups, the first observation to make is that very little research has been conducted on this topic. As with the student interviews, the chief sources are Luker (1989), Abercrombie and Terry (1978) and to a lesser extent Rudduck (1978). Again Luker's work provides a clear, albeit somewhat sparse, overview; and Abercrombie and Terry's (1978) monograph introduces some complexities and tensions into the account of tutors' intentions and perceptions. Much of Abercrombie and Terry's presentation of tutors' thoughts takes the form of edited transcripts of group discussions by staff on the topic of small group teaching, with only light commentary on these transcripts from Abercrombie and Terry themselves. Accordingly, I have had to 'mine' the data presented in *Talking To Learn* as one would a data set to create my own analysis rather than straightforwardly representing the authors' own interpretation of tutors' views.

Luker's (1989) study - tutors' purposes, 'likes' and 'dislikes'

Luker gathered written comments on small group teaching from fifteen of the tutors whose classes she had observed. The headings under which comments were invited were very similar to the ones used in the student questionnaires which were described earlier in the review. In her analysis of tutors' thoughts on the aims that they were trying to achieve in the class that she observed, Luker categorised five of her respondents as having "teacher-focused aims", one "student-focused aims" and nine "both teacher-focused and student focused aims". In using the phrase teacher-focused aims, Luker was indicating that these five tutors very much saw themselves as *the* active participants, the leaders in the group; whereas the tutor with "student-

focused aims" was centred on the "students' achievements" (Luker, 1989, p.74). She saw the tutors with "both teacher-focused and student-focused aims" as occupying an intermediate position, being concerned to facilitate their students' learning and to *lead* them towards specific objectives. Luker's findings thus suggest that certain tutors in higher education may be less 'student-centred' in their aims, less focused on enabling students to assume responsibility for their own learning, than the advocates of small group teaching.

In addition to giving this very synoptic view of tutors' general aims, Luker's analysis of the comments given by her respondents in the second section of the questionnaire provides a picture of the specific purposes that some of them were pursuing in small group teaching. For some tutors, small group classes gave the opportunity to check out students' understanding and to give "close supervision" of their work. For the tutors in the two French classes which were observed and a History tutor, small groups were seen as an opportunity to engage in close textual analysis. Three of the tutors in Luker's sample made reference to the opportunity which small groups provided to help individuals with problems. One respondent wrote of the way in which small groups allowed him to gain insight into how students were viewing the subject matter: "I must know the preconceptions of the individuals" (Luker, 1989, p. 82). The same tutor stressed the role that small groups could play in the "development of judgement" (ibid.). For another respondent an important purpose was to encourage collaborative activity and a spirit of co-operation and sharing of learning. Several tutors wished to see an active interchange of ideas between students.

There is then considerable diversity in the specific purposes and desired outcomes identified by Luker's respondents. Somewhat more commonality is shown in tutors' expressed 'likes' concerning small group teaching. Members of staff described as enjoyable aspects of their work the possibility of interacting with students and of "getting to know students better as people" (Luker, 1989, p.83). "Feeling of informality", "the informal atmosphere" also featured prominently in the descriptions that staff gave of what made for an enjoyable and profitable social occasion. As well as identifying an "informal atmosphere" as one of their 'likes', a number of Luker's respondents referred to the importance of "informality" in

encouraging student contributions. In writing about their 'likes', some of the tutors also identified what they perceived as distinct advantages of this form of teaching. For example, one individual wrote about how "better personal contact with the students" allowed him "to judge the capacity of the individual students more clearly and to gear teaching to their needs."(Luker, 1989, p.84).

Many of the stated 'dislikes' were the exact inverse of the aspects which tutors referred to as enjoyable or profitable. Tutors wrote of situations where it is hard to establish active participation or where problems arise in managing interaction between members of the group. A number of the statements of 'dislikes' draw attention to difficult tasks in group management, such as "shutting up the vociferous and bringing in the meek" and "disastrous if there are personality clashes" (Luker, 1989, p. 83). The difficulties that might arise from some subject areas being "intrinsically less exciting than others" were also raised by some respondents. One tutor highlighted the problem of ensuring that discussion followed profitable, 'relevant' lines in the comment that "considerable skill [is] involved in directing the discussion on fruitful lines" (Luker, 1989, p.83).

Under 'dislikes', a few of the tutor comments testify to the taxing nature of running a good tutorial. As examples of such statements: " keeping on your toes all the time! Perhaps I'm getting old – but it's tiring." and "It requires considerably more mental alertness and flexibility than a formal lecture, and can be a bit of a strain." (ibid.).

Possible tensions between different purposes

Luker provides a useful, but analytically and conceptually thin, account of tutors' general likes and dislikes. It was noted earlier in the chapter that her particular method of eliciting opinions from students and staff severely constrained what could be achieved in analysis and reporting.

The work of Abercrombie and Terry, however, allows one to build up a somewhat richer, more detailed, picture from the words of the tutors themselves as they talk through the practicalities, tensions between

competing purposes and dilemmas of small group teaching (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978).

A considerable part of the discussions transcribed and presented by Abercrombie was devoted to the exchange of hints and tactics, on matters such as, for example, how to bring the silent student into conversation (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, Chap. 3). The exchange of tactics, of pieces of 'craft' knowledge, is also an important feature of Rudduck's monograph. One practical matter which was highlighted in some of the tutor comments presented by Rudduck was the importance of careful preparation for small group teaching on the part of the tutor and the students. In the following quotation, the tutor identified one of the tasks of preparation as working out how to communicate the tutorial's purposes and activities in a clear manner to the students: "Students don't expect to get very much out of it if the staff are not very clear what they're supposed to give" (Rudduck, 1978, p.112). It needs to be noted, however, that this tutor also spoke of the need not to be too constrained by a carefully prepared pre-structuring of the group's activities and preferred outcomes:

> In a sense I was learning what needed to be talked about in a seminar when I was doing it. This may be an important thing – that the seminar leader does not go in with too rigid, preconceived ideas about how the seminar should go; he should be fairly flexible.
> (Rudduck, 1978, p.111)

Although the tactics and hints passed on in the discussion extracts presented by Abercrombie and Terry are useful, the chief value of these discussion transcripts is the way in which they show individual tutors wrestling with some of the problems and tensions which surround small group teaching. For example, some of the statements made by tutors reveal a clear tension between the wish to assist students to 'discover', to develop their own understandings, and the duty to instruct. One tutor observed during a group discussion that:

> There is this urge to come in and reformulate what a student has said. Certainly where you have a technical area there are different words all of which have a certain accepted meaning, and, when you find the student using one of these in a situation where he should be using another word, you feel you want to come in and give him the right word.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.66)

Chapter 3 will look in greater depth at the teacher's responsibility to ensure that students have a 'correct' understanding of a topic and at how pursuing this responsibility may on occasion be difficult to reconcile with Abercrombie's aim of weaning students away from the "authority-dependency" relationship.

Aside from the matter of a possible conflict of aims, the difficulties of putting a facilitative, 'non-directive', approach into practice were also brought up in a number of the tutor comments presented by Abercrombie and Terry and Rudduck. One of the tutors in Rudduck's study remarked on how:

> There's a danger, if you don't (talk), that you end up with a completely apathetic seminar because they feel that you're not in any way interested. So you're caught in the dilemma of appearing apathetic whereas in fact you're trying to put the onus on them ...
> (Rudduck, 1978, p.86)

Constraints

Constraints on tutors' own freedom and on their ability to facilitate students' movement towards greater autonomy feature in some of the extracts presented by Abercrombie and Terry. Tutors may, for example, be somewhat limited in the extent to which they can set their own agenda for tutorials. During a discussion which was focusing on the question of the importance of 'objectives' and communicating these objectives clearly to students, one participant pointed out that:

> The trouble is, very often the staff don't have clear objectives for their seminars, they take over seminars which are part of courses they haven't necessarily devised, and the reason why they don't clarify objectives for the student is that they have to clarify them for themselves, and that seems to be the real problem.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, pp. 58-59)

As Abercrombie and Terry themselves note, a subject which frequently recurred in the tutors' group discussions was the "tormenting problem" (Abercrombie and Terry, p.128) of how to cover the syllabus without at the same time constraining the students' freedom of debate. The pressure to cover the syllabus and the constraints that this pressure may place on the

nature of discussion are clearly illustrated in the following quotation from a tutor.

> We're so pressurized, seminars are very important. If they're only going to see you every so often, perhaps once a fortnight or week, they shouldn't waste the time on trivialities.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.119)

The pressures that arise from the need to cover the syllabus also appear in the following quotation from another tutor. In addition the quotation brings out very sharply the theme referred to earlier of the tension between the duty to instruct and the responsibility to help the student to discover. Although a fairly lengthy quotation, it seemed worth presenting in its entirety, given that it brings out very well the moral as well as the practical complexities that can arise in small group teaching and the position of power that a tutor occupies, even if she or he chooses to adopt a 'facilitative' role.

> Well, I'm either authoritarianly guiding them because I know what they have to know about the Marxist theory of value and that's what we've got to cover, or I'm authoritarianly saying 'they've got to learn about asking questions themselves and therefore I'm not going to guide them'. And then I feel frustrated because there are points I would like to raise about the Marxist theory of value. So it's either being authoritarian about the content, or deliberately being non-interventionist about the content. So I oscillate between authoritarianism and, as it were, a certain choking non-interventionism. And both ways it's non-reciprocal.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.129)

Self-confidence and display of subject knowledge

As the preceding quotation demonstrates, ethical questions concerning the use of their power as tutors did exercise some of the participants in Abercrombie and Terry's group discussions; but for certain tutors worries seem to have centred around not presenting a sufficiently puissant image to students. One participant described how:

> Just thinking about the kinds of things that might cause me to be tense in a seminar, the one that comes to mind first is, rather than feeling *too* authoritative, not feeling authoritative enough – if someone asks a question and I don't know the answer to it; I probably should know it because I am 'teacher'.
> (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.140).

Another tutor talked of her preference at the start of a new academic year "to do something I know I've done before [in tutorials]; I'm not going to be made to look silly right at the beginning." She went on to analyse her feelings, saying: "I think it's basically not feeling self-assured enough to admit error; and not feeling self-confident enough, so that I don't need students to say 'goodness what a lot she does know, she must be good.'" (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.143). An earlier section of the literature review has detailed the powerfully inhibiting effects on student participation of fears which centre around their perceived lack of knowledge. The preceding two quotations serve as a reminder that some members of academic staff may also feel insecure about their knowledge base and share the concern experienced by students that they may lose public face by not appearing sufficiently knowledgeable.

Discussion of the question of tutor anxieties about a possible failure to display sufficient subject knowledge during tutorials raises a cautionary note concerning the present study. The Introduction to the Study has described how the ten tutors interviewed were chosen on the basis of their reputation as skilled practitioners. As experienced and confident teachers they did not express the types of concerns identified by Abercrombie and Terry's two respondents. However, it has been my own experience in working with 'novice' tutors on training courses that they are often concerned about either not knowing enough about the subject to perform their tutorial duties properly or being 'shown up' in front of the students by revealing a gap in subject knowledge. Accordingly there will be an attempt in the thesis not to lose sight of the anxieties surrounding the public display of their subject knowledge that may be experienced by some tutors.

Summary of principal themes in the first part of the literature review

The first part of the literature review has, of necessity, been quite wide-ranging in its concerns. One important purpose has been to give a detailed account of the way in which the early advocates of small group teaching described the aims and nature of tutor-led discussion groups. It was established that Jane Abercrombie, the foremost exponent of small group teaching, had very specific aims in mind in implementing 'associative' discussion groups. Examination of the work of Abercrombie also served to introduce the themes that will figure largely in the following chapters of this thesis of:

- the development of understanding through the exchange of views and the negotiation of meaning;
- group 'climate';
- affective aspects of learning;
- and questions concerning authority in educational settings.

The enduring effect that Abercrombie's work has had on the practice of small group teaching and in forming the interests and preconceptions of researchers into discussion groups was described. However, changes over time in the way that small group teaching has been written about were also highlighted – in particular the move towards a greater concern with providing effective group management and the more recent, limited increase of interest in using tutorials as a forum to develop students' oral communication skills.

Moving from the theory of small group teaching to its practice, the picture that emerges from the structured observation studies reviewed in this chapter is of tutor-dominated talk. Moreover, some studies would seem to indicate that the cognitive level, the quality, of discussion may not always be particularly high. There is also some evidence of considerable variability between tutorial groups in the ratio of staff/student contributions and in the quality of discussion. It was noted that although observational work on small group teaching has produced a number of important insights, its focus of attention has been quite narrow. Research has concentrated on the *processes* of interaction, and little attention has been given to the *content* that

is being discussed in specific tutorials and to the *forms* of discourse that are being used.

The 'high' level of tutor talk, revealed by observational studies, has been judged by past researchers to be inappropriate. It needs to be observed, however, that this judgement has been guided by a particular conception of the nature of tutorial groups and of the role of the tutor. If one were to adopt a different conception of how tutorial groups ought to function which gave a more 'active' role to the tutor, a different judgement of what constituted an appropriate ratio of tutor/student talk might result. Considerable disquiet was expressed in this review chapter over the fact that a 'content-free' stance on levels of tutorial interaction has led some researchers, without firm justification, to adopt a 'deficit model' of tutor actions.

Turning to the work that has been done in collecting and presenting students' views on small group teaching, Rudduck's work (1978) has provided a clear summary of the difficulties that students report experiencing under the four headings of: *making a contribution, understanding the conventions, knowing enough to contribute,* and *being assessed.* In addition Rudduck's study and research conducted by Abercrombie and her associates has provided information on how students view the tutor's responsibilities and authority. Interesting findings concerning the differences that may exist between students in the purposes that they see themselves pursuing within tutorials have emerged from Shuttleworth's (1992) study.

Discussion of relevant findings from the wider body of recent research on student learning provided a convenient opportunity to stress the importance of not focusing research attention too narrowly on discussion groups as a *discrete* form of teaching. Attention needs to be given to the way in which tutorials may be shaped by the wider curricular, learning, teaching and assessment system in which they are situated. Participants' perceptions of tutorials will similarly be influenced by the whole teaching/learning system in which they are located, not simply by features of tutorials themselves.

It was noted that there are very few studies which provide direct access to tutors' views on discussion groups. However, the material presented in *Talking To Learn* (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978), and to a lesser extent in

Rudduck's (1978) monograph, does give valuable insight into the way in which individual tutors identify and struggle to make sense of some of the problems and tensions associated with small group teaching. The reporting of tutors' views in the present study will also show individuals talking through the tensions that may exist between the pursuit of different purposes.

In summary, this first part of the review has attempted to fulfil the aim of placing the present study within the context of previous work on small group teaching. The second part of the review will pursue the different purpose of framing this study within relevant theoretical perspectives on the nature of learning, talk in academic settings and social interaction in institutional contexts.

Chapter 3

Part Two of the Literature Review

Learning viewed from a socio-cultural perspective

The recent history of the social sciences has been marked by what has sometimes been called a 'turn to talk', by a concern with the *social action* that is achieved in and through language. Moving away from a narrowly 'representational' account of language, social scientists representing standpoints as diverse as: conversation analysis, discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, the constructionist perspective in psychology, have been united in highlighting the activities that are accomplished through language. This view of language then stresses its active, constitutive force rather than simply seeing it as a 'conduit' for the transmission of ideas. Consonant with this perspective on language, a view of learning has come to prominence which stresses the interdependency between an individual's development and her or his social and cultural context (Wertsch, 1991). Instead of viewing thought and agency as purely individual possessions, there is an emphasis on how the development of mind is situated within, and integrally connected with, particular social and cultural contexts (Misra, 1993). Rejecting the view of the child as an independent discoverer of her or his world, the accent is on the bringing of a child, or indeed an adult learner, into the practices and ways of being of particular communities. Taking a socio-cultural perspective on learning involves more than a mere shift towards giving greater recognition to the social aspects of learning. As an example of the type of readjustment in view which it entails, there is a change in the ontological status of the learner. Thus rather than thinking of an individual mind constructing sense out of the world, development is viewed in terms of *joint* and situated activity where responsibility for the processes and outcomes of learning is to some degree shared with others.

This conception of the nature of learning and the learner stands in some contrast to that of Abercrombie and her associates, where emphasis was placed on the cleansing away of unhelpful egocentric perception and interpretations and on the development of an autonomous learner. It is also a view of learning which is very far removed from the rhetoric of the "enterprise culture", described in the last chapter, which portrays individual 'consumers' of education acquiring discrete packages of skills, such as those of "oral communication". However, this account of learning and development provides a particularly apt theoretical perspective on the nature and purposes of university tutorials. An account where the accent is on bringing individuals into skilled performance of the activities valued in particular communities, and on giving them the means to be effective agents within these communities, would seem to capture the purposes that university tutorials serve in day to day practice.

This sociocultural perspective on learning has been guided by a number of different theoretical influences; but the chief inspiring source has been the fairly recent upsurge in influence in the West of the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. For that reason this perspective on learning is sometimes referred to as the 'neo-Vygotskian' account, and this term will be used in the current chapter, albeit with a recognition that the work of ethnomethodologists among others has also had an important shaping influence on this theory of learning. The present purpose is not to give a detailed examination of the intricacies of, and possible tensions within, the neo-Vygotskian account of learning, but simply to highlight those features which would appear to be of particular relevance to a study of university tutorials.

Negotiating meaning, argument and rhetoric

A central theme of the neo-Vygotskian account of learning, which is very pertinent to university tutorials, is the emphasis placed on how gaining particular new meanings or a wider understanding of a topic involves a process of active negotiation (Wertsch, 1991). For example, this emphasis on negotiating understanding appears very prominently in Jerome Bruner's more recent writings. Perhaps the strongest statement is to be found in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, where he talks in the following terms:

> So if one asks the question, where is the meaning of social concepts - in the world, in the meaner's head, or in interpersonal negotiation - one is compelled to answer that it is in the last of these. Meaning is what we can agree on or at least accept as a working basis for seeking agreement about the concept at hand. If one is arguing about social "realities" like democracy or equity or even gross national product, the reality is not the thing, not in the head, but in the act of arguing and negotiating about the meaning of such concepts. Social realities are not bricks that we trip over or bruise ourselves on when we kick at them, but the meanings that we achieve by the sharing of human cognition.
> (Bruner, 1986, p.122)

As this quotation exemplifies, Bruner stresses the active *construction* of new meanings and their provisional status – "accept as a working basis". The use of the term "negotiation" and the phrase "the act of arguing" also remind one that Bruner, (in common with other current writers influenced by Vygotsky), do not view the socialisation of individuals into the practices of a culture in terms of a straightforward imposition of 'consensus', 'orthodox' views. This point is illustratred even more forcefully in a further quotation from the same book, where Bruner observes that:

> the language of education, if it is to be an invitation to reflection and culture creating, cannot be the so-called uncontaminated language of fact and 'objectivity'. It must express stance and counter-stance and in the process leave room for reflection, for metacognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language or image what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it.
> (Bruner, 1986, p.129)

Although rooted in a rather different view of learning, this passage of Bruner's resonates with Abercrombie's insistence on the importance of enabling students to encounter alternative ways of framing the world and of exposing an individual's conceptions to social scrutiny. For Bruner, (as the preceding quotation reveals), the development of a reflective cast of mind and of an individual who can create, rather than simply absorb knowledge, requires a rhetorical form of education, one in which debate between opposing perspectives features prominently. This emphasis on the contentious nature of thinking in social exchanges is also a central theme of the recent rhetorical approach in social psychology (Billig, 1987; Billig, 1991). Within this approach it is claimed that many of the topics, subjects, which are

discussed not only in everyday talk but also within professional and scientific discourses are (what is rather inelegantly dubbed) "dilemmatic", i.e. they allow for the construction of different argumentative stances. A later section of the review will return to discuss how the availability of different perspectives on the same topic may affect the nature of tutor/student interaction within tutorials.

The quotations that have been presented from Bruner highlight the active and situated construction of meanings and the rhetorical nature of an educational process which aims to promote reflective thought. They do not, however, explicitly capture another central feature of talk in educational settings such as university tutorials – the way in which teachers shape students' utterances and thinking into appropriate forms and so control the nature of the understanding that is achieved. Bruner's concerns also draw attention to the way in which the learner is making active use of language to create new meanings and achieve a reflective quality of understanding. This stress on individual action and agency needs, however, to be tempered. Returning to Billig, he notes in a striking manner: "a general paradox of language, for the use of language involves both autonomy and repetition. The speaker simultaneously is in charge of language and is captured by it" (Billig, 1991, p.8).

Gaining ways of seeing

The shaping of thought that takes place through talk in educational settings and the acculturation of individuals within the practices that are valued by particular communities is discussed in a very subtle fashion in two recent articles by John Shotter (Shotter 1993a; 1993b). To meet the purpose of illuminating some of the features of university tutorials, I will concentrate on highlighting only a few of the most relevant principal threads in his complex web of argument. Some of Shotter's chief concerns are displayed, in a readily accessible fashion, within the following quotation where he presents his own interpretation of Vygotsky's well-known "cards-experiment" in which:

> .. the task faced by the children in the cards-experiment is not just to learn *a* way of using the cards, but to make use of them in the *right way* at the *right time*, according to how the adults (who are teaching them) have arranged the task. Thus at first, it is not "the task" itself that indicates what children have to do, and which corrects them if they go wrong, but the adults around them to whom they are responsible. They are the ones who can and do *judge* whether the child is acting correctly or not. They are the 'keepers', so to speak, of the culture that the child must acquire. (Shotter, 1993a, pp. 68-69)

Shotter points out that on this, as in other learning tasks, the child is not simply aided to acquire a personal ability to solve it, but is also guided to develop a particular "way of seeing" the problem situation. The child is given a culturally defined perspective on, grasp of, the task. With suitable modifications, the quotation from Shotter could describe the nature of the interaction between an adult novice learner and an 'expert' tutor – where what is being achieved is bringing the student towards a "way of seeing", of construing a particular topic or problem situation in an appropriate fashion. The quotation from Shotter moreover highlights the responsibilities that fall on the more experienced members of a culture, such as say that embodied within an academic discipline, both as guides to the less expert and as the keepers of the culture. While performing these responsibilities, the experienced, such as university teachers, are enabling novices to gain new framing perspectives on topics and abilities, yet at the same time also constraining their actions and "ways of seeing". The tension that may exist between the 'enabling' and 'constraining' actions that are required to bring a learner within a set of cultural practices will be examined in greater detail later in the review.

Shotter's own italicisation of the words *right way, right time* and *judge* in the quotation that was provided earlier is one indication of the emphasis that he places on the normative aspects of learning. Consonant with this emphasis on the normative features of teaching and learning, Shotter moves away from a perspective which sees learning simply as the acquisition of 'things'; and focuses attention on the gaining and performance of a set of cultural practices and on ways of being with others. In his own words:

> Thus our task in learning how to act personally, as an autonomous member of our culture, is in learning how *to do* all the things in our culture, like measuring, inferring, remembering, perceiving, listening, speaking, etc., we must learn how to do them as the others around us do them – we must learn how *to be* as they are. Indeed, if we do not, then they will sanction us and not accord us the right to act freely.
> (Shotter, 1993a, p.70)

On Shotter's account, learning, say, a repertoire of actions involves developing a sensitivity as to when and under what circumstances it is appropriate to put these actions into practice. If we wish to be "accounted full and proper members" of a culture, we also need, according to Shotter, to be able to justify our actions in a socially intelligible way, to show how they meet particular norms. An individual acquires knowledge not only of how to act appropriately within sets of regulated social practices but also knowledge about how to *display* one's understanding of the norms that underpin actions. Shotter's account of learning thus involves a rhetorical theme, in addition to the normative, ethical, theme which has been highlighted in the preceding paragraphs. What Shotter describes as "the development of methods of *warranting* in the course of one's talk" (Shotter, 1993b, pp. 384-385) is likely to be a particularly crucial matter for students in higher education. What will count as *good reasons* for the claims that one makes in talk in academic settings may be considerably different from the type of reasons that prevail in talk within 'everyday' settings. In order to become a fully-fledged participant in academic discussions, a student is faced with the task of learning what may be very specific standards of judgement of a discipline and its methods of warranting.

Turning aside from the review for the moment, it seemed appropriate to indicate how Shotter's account of learning was apposite to my concerns in the present project. In reading and re-reading the transcripts of the interviews between myself and the ten tutors I was forcibly struck by the fact that a number of their comments, rather than referring to specific, limited 'teaching objectives' could be seen as describing a particular practice of argument and way of being with others. Tutor comments also brought into focus the particular 'moral order' which they wished to see in place within tutorials. Accordingly when I later encountered Shotter's recent articles, his account of the nature of learning resonated with the interpretations that I

was forming, in particular of the tutor interview material. His account appeared to be an appropriate way of framing a number of the findings and the concerns of this present study: and the final discussion chapter will share with Shotter's account an emphasis on the *ethical* and *rhetorical* nature of social interaction and learning.

'Form' and 'content'

The features of Shotter's account of learning, social interaction and language discussed in the preceding paragraphs give a valuable *general* perspective on the nature of talk and social interaction in educational settings. At the same time there is a need to look at *specific* aspects of the nature of talk if one is to gain a clearer understanding of what is happening in university tutorials. Accordingly this section of the review, and the following section, will discuss perspectives and findings which illuminate a number of very important, specific, features of talk and social interaction.

One consequence of the move away from a narrowly representational view of language and of the Bakhtinian emphasis on the importance of 'speech genres' and 'social languages' (Wertsch, 1991; Clark and Holquist, 1984) is an appreciation of the close and intricate relationship that exists between the *content* and the *form* of a particular utterance or text. A number of linguists studying the development of literacy have recently come to stress the indivisibility of the learning of content and of its socially appropriate linguistic form. Freadman (1987) in setting up a game analogy argues that: "we do not ... learn the 'content' of a game – whatever that could be – and then learn the rules". (cited in Richardson, 1991, p.184). Richardson taking up this point notes how Freadman's analogy suggests "that we do not learn the 'content' of science and then learn the appropriate expository forms in which to write and speak about it." (ibid.).

This reminder of the indivisibility of the work of learning the content of a discipline and the appropriate form of discourse in which to represent that content, brings into focus the task that tutors may face in ensuring that topics are discussed in 'appropriate' language and in a way which respects the conventions of the discipline. The first part of the literature review presented Crick and Ralph's critical comments on the tutor practice of

paraphrasing student contributions to debate (Crick and Ralph, 1980). However, when the learning of the 'content' and 'form' of a subject is viewed as an indissolubly linked set of tasks, one can see that certain types of paraphrase may be of key importance in leading students into the language and forms of thinking of a discipline. For example, my own observations of tutorials revealed that tutors on occasion would take a term from a student, or a short statement in everyday language, provisionally accept this term and then proceed, sometimes in quite a gradual manner, to reformulate the student's statement in a more technically correct or discipline appropriate manner. This type of action would seem to fit closely with the *reconstructive paraphrases* which Edwards and Mercer (1987, pp. 147-148) describe school teachers using to recast pupils' utterances into a more acceptable form: and it also resonates with the way in which Newman, Griffin and Cole (1989) describe teachers *appropriating* children's use of terms or view of a problem, leading to cognitive change.

'Paraphrasing' student comments may well then be a very important means of socialising students into the appropriate practice of a particular academic discipline, rather than a manifestation of lack of teaching skill. The discussion of questions of form and content in the last few paragraphs also provides some clues as to why tutors in day to day practice find themselves taking a more engaged and active part in discussion than many advocates of small group teaching have until now considered desirable. As conscientious teachers they will wish not simply to facilitate discussion but also to ensure that this discussion follows an acceptable form, obeying the discourse conventions of their discipline. Ensuring that discussion is cast in an appropriate form may require considerable and skilful intervention.

Grounding

To gain a clearer view of the nature of interaction within tutorials there is a need not only to consider the questions related to discourse form which have been highlighted in the preceding section of the review, but also to look at accounts of how shared reference has to be *achieved* by participants. In a transmission model of communication the sender transmits a message which is then decoded, successfully or not, by the receiver (Wertsch, 1991, pp. 71-73). On this model, communication is 'unidirectional', from sender to

receiver, and the meanings encoded by the sender within the message remain the same throughout the process.

By contrast, writers whose view of learning is framed within a socio-cultural perspective have taken a rather different view of communication, emphasising the active generation rather than the simple transmission of meaning. Central to their understanding of the production and sharing of meaning are two key aspects of Bakhtin's account of language in action. One aspect is Bakhtin's general insistence on the grounding of individual utterances, attempts to establish a shared sense of meaning, within both local and wider contexts of talk. In his own words: "any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication" and "utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another" (Wertsch, 1991, p.52). It is worth observing that this view bears a strong correspondence with the position of the ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts who stress the need to see talk, social interaction and the creation of meanings as a local accomplishment.

For Bakhtin then talk and the sharing of meaning is a very active and context-sensitive process. The successful sharing of meaning, on Bakhtin's view, also involves effort by the listener as well as the speaker to bridge the gap between them. In his own words: "To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. *Any true understanding is dialogic in nature.*" (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p.232). This statement of Bakhtin's can be seen to refer to a similar phenomenon as Rommetveit's (1974) concept of *intersubjectivity.* [1] The participants in a dialogue jointly engage in the effort to achieve simultaneous understanding (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p.217).

This view of the nature of talk where the accent is on the collaborative work that is required to establish common reference and understanding has received considerable empirical support from the work of Clark and his

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[1] Rommetveit's concept of *intersubjectivity* is clearly captured in the following quotation:
"Once the other person accepts the invitation to engage in the dialogue, his life situation is temporarily transformed. The two participants leave behind them whatever were their preoccupations at the moment when silence was transformed into speech. From that moment on, they became inhabitants of a partly shared social world, established and continuously modified by their acts of communication."
(Rommetveit, 1974, p.23)

associates (Clark and Carlson, 1982; Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Clark and Schaefer, 1987; Schober and Clark, 1989) and from the study of Garrod and Anderson (1987). In their studies, Clark and his associates have demonstrated the collaborative nature of talk, (in both informal and institutional settings), and the way in which a shared, mutually endorsed, topic emerges during a process which they refer to as *grounding* (Clark and Schaefer, 1987). The meaning of the concept *grounding* is conveyed succinctly in the following quotation from Schober and Clark (1989, pp. 212-213):

> The idea is that the participants in a conversation try to establish the mutual belief that the listeners have understood what the speaker meant to a criterion sufficient for current purposes. This is a collaborative process, called *grounding*, that requires actions by both speakers and their addressees (Clark and Schaefer, 1987a). A reference or a question, for example, is not considered complete until both speaker and addressees have acknowledged that they have established the mutual belief that it has been understood.

In addition to stressing the collaborative work that is required to establish common reference, the quotation from Schober and Clark brings into focus the need to *display* to others that at least some common ground of understanding has been achieved. Applying this insight to educational settings, it means as Keppler and Luckmann (1991) have recognised in their study of the 'Conversational transmission of knowledge' that: " Successful *transfer of knowledge* presupposes the participation of the recipient. More than that (or, rather more precisely) it requires that the recipient *show* his participation." (Keppler and Luckmann, 1991, p.153).

As well as pointing up the active collaboration that is required to establish some common understanding within discussion groups or teaching exchanges, the work reviewed in this section also implies that *both* tutors and student participants bear responsibilities to engage in the effort to achieve at least some degree of mutual understanding. However, unlike informal conversations, talk in educational settings is likely to be marked by a somewhat uneven distribution of responsibility between tutor and students for the work of achieving common reference, as well as for the direction and discourse form which discussion takes. The next part of the review will turn to examine in some depth the wide topic of the asymmetries in responsibilities, knowledge and status which exist in university tutorial

groups and the possible effects of these asymmetries on the nature of discussion.

Power and asymmetries

One weakness which needs to be acknowledged in the accounts of learning given by most writers who have been influenced by the neo-Vygotskian approach is that, in general, insufficient attention has been given to the effects that *asymmetries* in power, status and knowledge between a teacher and students have on the 'negotiation', construction of new meanings (Goodnow, 1990). Acknowledging this weakness, the following part of the review examines in some detail work that has considered how asymmetries in knowledge, status and power between participants may influence the nature and quality of dialogue. It is hoped that the following pages will demonstrate that focusing attention on power relations and asymmetries in university tutorials can raise some interesting questions for the neo-Vygotskian account of learning. This part of the review will begin by considering the power that is associated with the tutor's responsibility to ensure that students become competent in the practices of a particular discipline.

'Disciplining' the students

Diana Laurillard in a recent text has observed how academic learning is not directly experienced, but is necessarily mediated by the lecturer or tutor (Laurillard, 1993, p.5). Laurillard highlights in a very trenchant fashion the power that is associated with this mediating role:

> Although it is often argued that in university education we should encourage students to develop their own point of view within a subject, to be critical and not accept spoon-feeding, we none the less expect right answers. It is perfectly permissible to criticise an authority's argument, but students must give an accurate account of it, and their critique must be well-argued. No matter how democratic we are about respecting the student's point of view, there is always a pre-defined standard of answer. That is why our model of education at undergraduate level is more often didactic than negotiated, ... And that is why as teachers we have the major responsibility for what and how our students learn.
> (Laurillard, 1993, p.2)

Implicit in this quotation from Laurillard is a recognition of two different types of power that tutors possess vis-à-vis students. There is the power that comes through the possession of knowledge and the power that arises from their role in the university as an organisation. As university teachers, tutors have the gatekeeping role of ensuring that students act in accordance with the standards of argument which prevail within the academic community and come to have an appropriate understanding of the content of a particular discipline. The responsibility to 'discipline' students, to acculturate them into the ways of the academic tribe, may well on occasion conflict with the aim propounded by Abercrombie of bringing about a change in the authority-dependency relationship. This is a matter which will be pursued further in the next section of the review.

The quotation from Laurillard also serves to highlight the very marked power that tutors possess in their social role as arbiters of what will count as appropriate knowledge or be an acceptable contribution to discussion. For the polemical purpose of furthering her argument against more 'conventional' views of the nature of higher education, she does, however, set out matters in somewhat black and white terms. In many social science and arts subjects, even at undergraduate level, there are often no "right answers" that can be given to a particular question or problem; but rather a number of 'expert' positions, different perspectives on the same topic. Although students will be expected to display particular forms and standards of argument, they will not necessarily be coerced to adopt one particular perspective on a topic and to disavow all other perspectives. Indeed very many tutors will wish to give students a sense of the debates that enliven and sustain their discipline. Some tutors will also wish their students to gain a view of themselves as being able to engage actively in these debates. Student choice over what perspectives on a topic can be adopted, and how to argue for these perspectives, may be very limited, but in many subjects it need not be illusory.

Laurillard's account of the control that university teachers exercise over their students' understandings appears plausible. However, the 'disciplining' of students' thoughts and actions is not necessarily a goal that teachers consciously pursue: and indeed many tutors would feel distinctly uncomfortable about seeing themselves as controlling the shape and direction of students' understanding rather than enabling their learning. Laurillard herself recognises, in the following quotation, the discomfort or distaste that most university teachers would feel about seeing their role as a didactic and controlling one:

> So are students just puppets, dancing to the tunes of their various teachers, helplessly buffeted by the forces around them? This a model that university teachers strongly resist, remembering, perhaps their own heightened sense of personal responsibility for what they learned, and anxious to preserve the joy of exploration and discovery for their own students.
> (Laurillard, 1993, p.3)

There are, to the best of my knowledge, no studies in higher education which have provided a fine-grained examination of educational discourse and examined the way in which teachers' actions in talk relate to their ideology of teaching. However, such an exercise has been conducted by Edwards and Mercer (1987) for primary education, and it is instructive to consider a number of the major themes which emerged in their study. Edwards and Mercer noted how the teachers in their study had acquired a 'child centred' theory of education where the accent was on experiential and practical learning; and the teacher's role was to facilitate children's discovery of knowledge and to provide them with appropriate learning opportunities. At the same time they found that a principal feature of talk in the classrooms where they observed was "the extent of teacher control over both the discourse and, through that, the content of knowledge" (Edwards and Mercer, 1987, p.130). This conflict between the day to day reality of teacher control and an ideology of teaching which stressed children's independent discovery left teachers with a "fundamental dilemma":

> that of balancing the conflicting demands of, on the one hand, a child-centred ideology of learning and, on the other hand, an essentially socializing role as the society's agents of cultural transmission in the context of a system of compulsory education. The pupils have to be seen to be learning the right sorts of things, but at the same time to be discovering them for themselves.
> (Edwards and Mercer, 1987, p.168)

Edwards and Mercer gave an account of the ways in which the teachers in their study sought to resolve this dilemma.

It is in principle at least possible that teachers in higher education may face a somewhat similar dilemma between socialising students into the practices of a particular discipline and following a 'student-centred' ideology of teaching, where the accent is on the facilitation of learning and the development of student autonomy.

Exchange relations / power relations – the work of Per Linell

A radical critique of the work of Abercrombie and other writers on small group teaching could argue that the attempt to move students away from an 'authority - dependency relationship' is a sham when one takes into account the socialising, 'disciplining' role played by the tutor, which has been described in the preceding section of the review. Drawing on the work of Foucault and his followers one could make a case that Abercrombie's views on small group teaching provide a false front of agency which disguises the real power of social discourses to shape the minds and actions of individuals. My own preference, however, is not to go down that particular route, in part because such a radical critique paints a much too black and white picture of the nature of the relationship between university teachers and students. A simple dichotomy is assumed whereby tutor-student relationships must *either* be marked by freedom and equal rights to set the agenda of discussion *or* by constraint and the imposition of power. Such a dichotomy appears to me to give a false picture of the nature of interaction in educational settings and ignores the complexity of the relationships of power and of consent that exist between tutors and students.

A valuable account of aspects of power in institutional settings which totally avoids this type of either/or thinking has come from Per Linell (1990). Linell

notes that there has been a tendency within the social sciences to interpret both social structures and social processes in terms either of *exchange relations* marked by "voluntariness, balance and symmetry" or in terms of *power relations* "characterized by compulsion, imbalance and asymmetry" (Linell, 1990, p.168). Linell observes that it is not useful to categorise social situations as necessarily belonging to one or other of these mutually exclusive categories of *power relations* and *exchange relations*. While recognising that situations vary greatly in the power relations that obtain between their participants, Linell argues that: "all situations can be analysed both as exchange and power (or dominance). Direction, control and compliance, and initiative and response are always present in dialogue, and power relations are always to some extent intercursive." (Linell, 1990, p.168).

Moving away from thinking about exchange and power relations in either / or terms, Linell demonstrates the value of a simple taxonomy of social situations which separates out the two dimensions of symmetry-asymmetry and co-operation-confrontation. He proposes that social situations can be thought of in terms of four ideal types:

the symmetrical-and-co-operative type(s);
the symmetrical-and-competitive type(s);
the asymmetrical-and-co-operative type(s);
the asymmetrical-and-competitive types(s).

In symmetrical-and-co-operative type(s) of social situations, the accent is on collaboration, all participants are equally active, and responses are invited rather than required (Linell, 1990, pp.168-169). Informal conversation between friends who have a mutual interest in, and familiarity, with the topics of discussion would fall into this type. Aspects of Linell's description of the symmetrical-and-co-operative type(s) would also seem to fit the ideal of engaged, co-operative, equal interaction propounded by the advocates of small group teaching. In symmetrical-and-competitive situations, however, all participants are again equally active but they do not work to establish common understanding or consensus. Individuals pursue their own arguments and may give little attention to the topics, initiatives, of other participants. The result is conflict and confrontation. Within asymmetrical-and-competitive encounters, one party is dominant and the other partner or

partners fail to comply with the initiatives of the dominant party, show reluctance to enter into dialogue. Empirical work conducted by Linell and his associates suggests that this type of interaction is not common in institutional contexts, "at least not in routine tasks in a relatively consensus-oriented society like that of contemporary Sweden" (Linell, 1990, p.169).

Most institutional interactions appear to belong to the asymmetrical-and-co-operative type(s) where there is both complementarity in participation and a division of responsibilities. One party in the situation tends to take the initiative, requesting responses and the other participant or participants attempt to comply with these initiatives. Linell notes that a commonly occurring chain of events in asymmetrical-and-co-operative situations is that:

> superior parties, e.g. professionals in institutional contexts, do provide some opportunities for subordinate parties to speak, but it is not uncommon that these opportunities remain unexploited. This then forces the superiors to return to more dominant actions, and the whole interaction reverts to asymmetries again.
> (Linell, 1990, p.169)

Linell himself recognises the limitations of his two dimensional typology of social situation types, and he has elaborated on it to capture more of the complexities of social situations. For present purposes, however, the simple distinction that he makes between symmetry-asymmetry and co-operation-confrontation is clearly very fruitful in thinking about the nature of participation and of power relations in university tutorials.

One important advantage for the study of university tutorials of Linell's move away from seeing social situations in terms either of power relations or exchange relations is that it is easier to capture developmental changes in the nature of the relationship between students and a tutor. As students progress through their undergraduate career building up knowledge of the content of a subject and of the forms of academic discourse, and acquiring greater experience in debate, the asymmetries that exist between them and tutors will be reduced to some degree. Students in their final year can be expected to assume greater responsibility for contributing perspectives on a topic of discussion; they have moved somewhat nearer to being equal partners in the game of academic debate. Movement away from an 'authority-dependency' relationship is at least more possible as students

become successfully acculturated into the practices of academic life. In the present study the question of differences between years, including perceptions of the effects of an increase in subject knowledge, is explored in the analysis of student interview material.

Even in tutorial interactions with first year students where asymmetries in power and knowledge are likely to be most marked, successful socialisation of students into the ways of a discipline requires the establishment of some mutuality of perspective between tutor and students not a coercive transmission of ideas. An earlier section of the review has stressed the collaboration that is required to sustain dialogue and the way in which meanings are actively and jointly constructed by the participants in talk. Writing about the nature of the interaction between an "expert" and a "novice", Wintermantel observes that: "In the course of the instructional dialogue the participants start from different points with different purposes and they have to come together by coordinating their individual perspectives." (Wintermantel, 1991, p.130). Although any learning encounter is more likely to be driven by the purposes of the 'expert' than those of the 'novice', a successful teacher needs to take into account the perspective of the novice and to construct explanations and questions which are appropriate to the novice's current perspective on a topic. Teaching situations may involve important asymmetries in power and knowledge, but a successful teaching encounter does not involve the simple transmission of knowledge de haut en bas but a jointly constructed dialogue whose shape and direction will be influenced to some degree at least by the 'novices'.

This section of the review has attempted to move away from a simple black and white picture and to offer a more appropriately complex account of the 'power relations' that obtain between tutors and students in small group and other forms of teaching. Before concluding this section, it seemed important to highlight a simple but vital point: that there is not necessarily a straightforward, one-to-one correspondence, between asymmetries in knowledge and asymmetry in participation in tutorial groups. Tutors' greater knowledge and their 'responsibility to teach' may very often lead them to speak for a large proportion of the time and to control the direction and shape of the talk. However, this is not a necessary outcome. For a variety of reasons, including say a commitment to a 'student-centred' view of

learning, tutors may choose to exercise their interactional privileges only lightly and to curtail their own teaching actions, leaving more interactional space and initiative with the students. Whether the tutorial interaction then becomes less asymmetrical in character depends, in Linell's terms, on the extent to which students are willing and/or able to take on greater initiative. *Global* differences in power and knowledge between tutors and students may translate into markedly different degrees of control of participation in *particular* tutorials.

The democratization of discourse

Some aspects of the power and exchange relations that obtain between tutors and students can be seen more clearly when language in educational settings is viewed from a wider social and historical perspective. Writers, such as Fairclough (1992), have drawn attention to an ongoing social change in the use of language which has been labelled the 'democratization' of discourse. In using the term 'democratization' of discourse, Fairclough is referring to the "removal of inequalities and asymmetries in the discursive and linguistic rights, obligations and prestige of groups of people" (Fairclough, 1992, p.201). Two specific aspects of this general democratization of discourse, identified by Fairclough, would seem to be of particular relevance to the analysis of the nature of tutor-student interaction in higher education. He observes how within institutional settings, including universities and schools, there has been a reduction in the use of "overt markers of hierarchy and power asymmetry" (Fairclough, 1992, p.203). This avoidance of overt markers of power and status has been accompanied by a movement towards a greater informality in speech in educational and professional discourse.

Fairclough notes that the movement away from overt markers of power and asymmetry could be interpreted as merely "cosmetic" (Fairclough, 1992, p.203), involving the substitution of covert for overt control. Fairclough believes that there is some truth in this interpretation, "but only a half truth" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 204): 'democratized' discourse cannot be a straightforwardly satisfactory instrument of social control. He states that:

> Using the forms of democratized discourse – eliminating overt asymmetries in terms of address, being informal, moving onto the common ground of conversation – makes certain implicit claims about the nature of the social relationships being enacted, which are not sustainable where democratization is being simulated. The result may be a contradiction in discursive practice between the forms and the content of democratized discourse, which may become a terrain of struggle.
> (Fairclough, 1992, p.222)

The quotation from Fairclough suggests that it would be unwise to treat the informal atmosphere and democratic forms of address which characterise many present-day university tutorials as relatively unimportant, *surface,* features of the talk. Rather these features of talk may lead students to develop distinct expectations about how they *should* be treated by tutors and each other, may help to construct a particular order of being and relating to others. The claim that the features of informality and of democratic address may have a constitutive force, or at least may lead to the belief that certain ways of relating to each other should prevail in tutorials, is given some support by findings from the student interviews that are presented later in the thesis. In particular, an account will be given of how one student described her loss of respect for a tutor who was seen to act in an authoritarian way which broke with the expectations set up by an informal, and avowedly democratic form of discourse.

Perceptions of equality / inequality

One important limitation of theorising and research on language, power and institutional settings has been a relative lack of interest in individuals' subjective experience of equality or inequality. Attention has focused on 'macro' issues of how the power structures of the wider society pervade individual institutional contexts or on the 'micro' features of how 'power' is marked by particular linguistic features and forms of interaction (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Hodge and Kress, 1993; Ng and Bradac, 1993). For a discussion of the experiential aspects of the power relationships that hold between professionals and their clients, there is a need to turn to the literature on counselling. In a celebrated dialogue between Martin Buber and Carl Rogers, Buber strongly challenged Rogers's advocacy of an egalitarian relationship between a therapist and a client (reprinted in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990). Buber pointed out a number of ways

in which the relationship between therapist and client was manifestly unequal; and the implication of his argument was that it would be as well to admit honestly the presence of these inequalities. Rogers's chief rejoinder to Buber was to argue that the inequalities pointed out by Buber could be transcended in a *felt* sense of equality between client and therapist. In Rogers's own words: "I do feel there's a real sense of equality between us." (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990, p.51). Later in the dialogue, Rogers makes a clear distinction between the external perspective of an observer on this question of equality/inequality in the counselling relationship and the internal, subjective, frame of reference of the participants themselves:

> it has been my experience that that is reality when it is viewed from the outside, and that that really has *nothing* to do with the relationship that produces therapy. That is something immediate, equal, a meeting of two persons on an equal basis – even though, in the world of I-It, it could be seen as a very unequal relationship.
> (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990 , pp. 51-52)

Debate on the topics of how equal a counselling relationship can or should be is still vigorous (Brink, 1987; Burstow, 1987; Rogers, 1987). My current interest is not in exploring the details of that particular debate, but simply in pointing up the useful distinction that emerged in the Buber-Rogers dialogue between an external and an internal frame of reference on the question of equality. Students in a discussion group might *feel* that they were *treated* by the tutor as equals, as beings equally worthy of consideration and respect; while still being aware of important inequalities in status, knowledge, and possibly also of interactional rights. Differences between students in their felt sense of being treated as an equal or as an inferior might possibly in turn affect the extent and the nature of their engagement in the tutorial.

Face concerns and face work

Moving on to another topic which is of central importance for an understanding of the nature of interaction in university tutorials, the way in which individuals respond to each other in educational settings is likely to be powerfully affected both by their concerns about how they are presenting themselves and by the particular tactics of self-presentation which they employ. Private and public self-image management motives and tactics have been a major focus of interest for personality and social psychologists (Hales, 1985). Work on the presentation and defence of self in everyday life has been very heavily influenced by Goffman's pioneering efforts (Goffman 1959, 1971), and in particular by the concepts of 'face' and 'facework' which he brought into prominence. Goffman saw 'face' as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (Goffman, 1972, p.5). A person's definition of face was also not a wholly idiosyncratic matter, but one made "in terms of approved social attributes" (ibid.). 'Facework' was defined as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face." A fuller sense of how face concerns and face work may shape social interaction is given in the article, *Replies and responses*:

> an additional set [of constraints] apply, namely, constraints regarding how each individual ought to handle himself with respect to each of the others, so that he not discredit his own tacit claim to good character or the tacit claims of the others that they are persons of social worth whose various forms of territoriality are to be respected. Demands for action are qualified and presented as mere requests which can be declined.
> (Goffman, 1976, p.266)

The emphasis in the definition of facework, provided in the last paragraph, is on the actions that need to be taken to develop and sustain *one's own* self-image. As the immediately preceding quotation indicates, however, facework has a dual aspect, being directed also towards the claims of "social worth" of *others*. Implicit in the quotation from Goffman is also the *mutuality* of interest of the actors in a social situation in taking account of each others' face concerns.

In addition to this important distinction between self-directed and other-directed facework, a useful contrast has been drawn by the sociolinguists Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) between *positive* and *negative* face.

According to Brown and Levinson, *negative* face is the aspect of a person's public self-image which is concerned with the claim to "personal preserves" – to "freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). *Positive* face refers to the claims that individuals make for a "positive consistent self-image" (ibid.) which is approved of, appreciated by "at least some others" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.62).

This distinction between *negative* and *positive* aspects of face was one of the building blocks on which Brown and Levinson constructed an account of how face work directed towards others is achieved largely through the use of politeness strategies. Their account of politeness and its social functions has been highly influential; and although aspects of their theory have attracted critique and attack, it has also received considerable support from empirical studies (Penman, 1990; Wood and Kroger, 1991). A central feature of their theory of politeness is the contrast they draw between positive and negative politeness. Negative politeness is concerned with respect for an individual's claims to self determination, the protection of the individual's 'negative' face from imposition by others. In Brown and Levinson's own words: "negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint", and is marked by indirectness of expression, for example, in the making of requests in an indirect manner (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.70). By contrast, positive politeness is concerned with establishing familiarity, affiliation and being attentive to the individual. This attentiveness to the individual's 'positive' face may be achieved, for example, by treating an individual "as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked" (ibid.).

The distinction that Brown and Levinson draw between negative and positive politeness is an important tool in the analysis of talk in tutorials which is being conducted, in addition to the analysis of interview material in the present thesis. Staying focused on the concerns of the present thesis with the ways in which tutors and students may view participation in tutorials, the earlier part of the literature review has documented the worries that student informants in previous research studies have expressed about 'losing face' in public. The analysis of the findings of the student interviews in this study will also note students' expressed concerns about their public self-image. In addition, attention will be given to the way in which students

thought about the face concerns of their peers – a topic which has received only passing reference in previous work. It will be shown in Chapter 6, for example, that the concern which some students had to avoid threatening the face of their peers very much inhibited their willingness to debate a point with another student participant.

Moving from the perspective of the students to look at other-directed facework from the tutor's point of view, the distinction that Brown and Levinson make between negative and positive politeness can be used to highlight the difficult balancing act that may confront a sensitive tutor. There is a need to avoid acting in a way which will be too intrusive, encroach too much on an individual participant's rights and at the same time a need to act in an affiliative manner, to involve participants in the discussion, to establish common ground and possibly some sense of group identity. Chapter 7 will illustrate that the tutors interviewed in the present study were very much concerned both to avoid acts that might threaten an individual student's face and to establish a 'safe', affiliative group atmosphere. The tension that existed between avoiding face-threatening actions and pursuing teaching actions which might endanger students' sense of their public self-image and create anxiety will be revealed in this chapter. At the same time it will be shown that the tutors' wish to avoid actions that students might see as particularly face-threatening was not simply guided by 'practical' objectives to promote effective group interaction, but was also a matter of moral principle. The tutors could be seen to be concerned that a particular way of relating to others, a distinct 'moral order', should prevail within tutorials.

Returning from this brief preview of how the thesis will examine face concerns and face work within university tutorials, there is a very important general insight on talk in educational settings which arises from a consideration of the importance of face concerns and face work in social interaction. An earlier section of the review has stressed the extent to which talk, in diverse settings, is co-operatively based, involving a considerable degree of active collaboration on the part of the participants. This conception of the nature of talk is currently a dominant, indeed one might even claim the 'orthodox', perspective. A number of writers, however, including principally Penman (1990) have pointed out that the existence of goals in

conversation other than co-operation also needs to be recognised. Based partly on her empirical study of facework in the setting of the courtroom, Penman has argued that: "If one takes the notion of facework seriously, there are good reasons why cooperation cannot be the overriding goal, face-needs of self overriding needs of cooperation with the other." (Penman, 1990, p.36).

As a cautionary note on the general applicability of Penman's claim, the fear of loss of face and face threatening actions would seem to be very much part and parcel of interaction in courtrooms. In other settings, including those of school and university, where there may be relatively less threat to face, facework may not be quite as salient a matter. However, the quotation from Penman does serve as an important reminder of the constraints which face-needs may place on co-operation at a 'local' level, within particular sequences of talk, and at a more general level on students' willingness to pursue a common purpose in discussion. The analysis of student interview material provided in the thesis has been alert to this theme of the constraints that face concerns may place on students' willingness to collaborate with others in engaged discussion.

Summary

This second part of the Literature Review has presented some of the principal features of an account of learning where the accent is on the bringing of individuals into the appropriate performance of particular sets of cultural practices. This theoretical account emphasises the normative and rhetorical nature of social interaction and learning: and it has been argued that it provides an appropriate framing perspective on certain of the findings and concerns of this study. The review then moved from the consideration of this general account of learning to focus in on some features of talk in educational settings which are of key importance to the present study. It was observed that the learning of the content and the discourse form of a subject are indissolubly connected and that tutors may be faced with the task not only of facilitating discussion but of ensuring that topics are addressed in appropriate language. Attention was also drawn to the fact that the sharing of meaning is a very context-sensitive process, and to the active collaboration

that is involved in establishing a common understanding of a topic within discussion groups or in tutor-student exchanges.

Turning to questions of power and of asymmetries that exist in tutorial groups, the chapter has argued strongly against taking a simple, black and white picture of the power relations that exist between tutors and student participants. Relationships between students and tutors are constituted by a complex, competing, interplay of general and local factors and cannot be characterised satisfactorily in any clear-cut scheme. This is not a trivial matter for the analysis of findings within the present study. The complexities revealed in the **Power and asymmetries** part of the review suggest that there might be distinct dangers in forcing respondents' comments on matters relating to authority and responsibilities into quite hard-edged analytical categories. There could also be a danger in interpreting tensions and ambiguities within a student respondent's talk concerning the tutor's role only in *individual* terms, say of a lack of maturity, rather than viewing it as an attempt to make sense of a complex social situation.

The final part of the review on **Face concerns and face work** considered a number of issues which come into focus when one looks at the concerns about how they are presenting themselves experienced by individuals in educational settings. A discussion of face concerns also brings back into prominence certain of the themes which featured at the very beginning of the literature review in the description of Abercrombie's pioneering work: the potential anxiety that surrounds learning and discussion and the importance of providing a "permissive atmosphere".

The review highlighted the attention that will be given in the analysis of student interview material to self, and other-directed, face concerns and face-work. Looking at matters from the tutors' perspective, a brief preview was given of the importance placed by tutors interviewed in the present study on avoiding actions which students might find particularly face-threatening and on creating a safe group atmosphere.

Moving from the perspectives of individual students and tutors to consider how face concerns and face work affect the nature of group interaction, this

part of the review introduced an important theme and counter-theme. In discussing Goffman, it was noted that there is a "mutuality of interest of the actors in a social situation in taking account of each others' face concerns". However, the presentation of the work of Penman brought into view limitations on the extent to which face concerns establish mutuality of interest and co-operation. An emphasis on mutuality needs to be tempered by an awareness of the ways in which "face-needs of self" may override the "needs of cooperation with the other." (Penman, 1990, p.36).

The principal topics discussed in this present chapter have a direct relevance to talk in interviews as well as to discussion groups. This second part of the Literature Review can be seen then to have had a dual purpose of not only illuminating features of tutorial groups, the *content* that has been studied, but also of providing a frame in which to view some of the concerns and actions involved in the *process* of research. The following chapter, Methodological Issues and Procedures, will look in detail at the process of research and in doing so will need to return to some of the main themes of this present chapter; such as the active negotiation of new meanings, and power and discourse.

Chapter 4

Methodological Issues and Procedures

Introduction

This chapter sets out (i) to discuss the methodology adopted in this study, (ii) to identify and reflect on the methodological issues raised by the approach which was adopted. It aims to give a clear account of all of the stages involved in the conduct of this study: including the relationship between the interview and observational studies; sampling issues; the selection of interview topics; the nature of the interviews; transcription procedures; the work of analysis; presentation decisions and the negotiation of a draft account with the staff informants. There will also be a rationale provided for many of the individual decisions that were taken during the course of the study; and the efforts that were made to follow the standards of good practice will be outlined.

Although the chapter is very firmly centred on my own efforts and problems as a researcher, there will be at least some attempt made to avoid having a too narrowly egocentric researcher's perspective. The chapter will bear in mind Mishler's reminder that there is a need "to shift attention away from investigators' "problems," such as technical issues of reliability and validity, to respondents' problems, specifically, their efforts to construct coherent and reasonable worlds of meaning and to make sense of their experiences." (Mishler, 1986, p.118). In addition to taking account of "respondents' problems", the chapter will describe the ways in which the analysis and presentation of findings has been influenced by a particular conception of the role and responsibilities of the reader.

The first part of the chapter, *validation issues and styles of analysis*, explores a number of central issues in conducting qualitative research. It seemed appropriate to use this first part of the chapter to set out clearly my general stance in this study on matters concerning validation and analysis, prior to

giving a detailed description and specific reflections on the methodology that was followed.

Validation Issues and Style of Analysis

Establishing the "trustworthiness" of my research actions

In giving a fairly full account of my research activities, I will also attempt to account for these activities. Given this intention to provide a warrant for key research decisions and actions at relevant points throughout the narrative of how the study was conducted, it seemed necessary to state my own position on questions of validity and reliability. For it has become all the more important yet difficult in these postempiricist times to decide a personal stance on a) what philosophical perspective provides the most appropriate underpinning for one's thinking about questions of validity, b) how in practice one distinguishes between "good" and "bad" research and c) how one demonstrates to others that research has been conducted competently and that conclusions are well warranted.

One response among qualitative researchers to the insecurity of living in a postempiricist age has been to attempt to reintroduce certainty by establishing standardised procedures for the conduct of qualitative research and the testing of the validity of the knowledge created by a study (e.g., Miles and Huberman, 1984). Such an attempt to introduce a standardisation of procedures seems ill-suited to an approach whose strength lies in its ability to tailor its actions, to give a sensitive response to the *local* context that is being studied. Putting standardised procedures into practice will also necessarily involve a researcher adapting them to a particular context and making many individual value judgements which cannot be specified by a set of general procedural rules.

An approach to the validation of inquiry which appears more promising than this pursuit of standardisation is to be found in a recent article by Mishler (Mishler, 1990). In a review of the philosophical perspectives taken by scholars interested in examining the problems of judging social and educational enquiry Smith (1993) identifies a group to whom he gives the

label of "interpretivists". Smith observes that for these interpretivists "the task of distinguishing knowledge from opinion and good from bad research is an eminently practical and moral task – not an epistemological one whose rationality is directed by more or less determinate rules or standards." (Smith, 1993, p.163). Judged on the basis of his 1990 article, Mishler can be seen to be guided by this interpretivist stance on the nature of validation in social inquiry. Mishler sets out to provide a new perspective on assessing validity – a perspective which involves reformulating "validation as the social construction of knowledge. With this reformulation, the key issue becomes whether the relevant community of scientists evaluates reported findings as sufficiently trustworthy to rely on them for their own work." (Mishler, 1990, p.417). Mishler goes on in his article to develop the point that concentrating attention on trustworthiness rather than truth "displaces validation from its traditional location in a presumably objective, nonreactive, and neutral reality, and moves it to the social world" (Mishler, 1990, p.420). This social world, he observes, is constructed in and through our discursive practice, "through praxis" (ibid.). A particular advantage for the present study of Mishler's perspective on validation is that of course it is consonant with the view of learning and of the warranting of claims made in everyday speech presented in Chapter 3.

Mishler not only provides a refreshing theoretical perspective on questions concerning validation, but also gives a clear statement of what he sees as the implications for day-to-day practice of this perspective. The following quotation contains the core of his recommendations for practice:

> The view of validation that I have advanced suggests that the questions to be asked about my study, and of any study within any research tradition, are: What are the warrants for my claims? Could other investigators make a reasonable judgment of their adequacy? Would they be able to determine how my findings and interpretations were "produced" and, on that basis, decide whether they were trustworthy enough to be relied upon for their own work? I believe these questions have affirmative answers. The primary reason is the visibility of the work: of the data in the form of the texts used in the analysis, with full transcripts and tapes that can be made available to other researchers; of the methods that transformed the texts into findings; and of the direct linkages shown between data, findings, and interpretation.
> (Mishler, 1990, p.429)

At first sight the questions posed by Mishler in this quotation may not appear as particularly challenging or to demand much of a change in practice. On closer inspection, however, this first impression can be seen to be mistaken. There is a distinct shift in perspective from an *individual* researcher bearing sole responsibility for following the neutral standards that ensure validity to validation as a *social* act where judgements of adequacy are a more collective responsibility. Mishler's demand for *visibility* of the work to allow this social act of validation to take place seems a very innocuous request; but if it is taken seriously it requires a considerable change within qualitative studies in the reporting of procedures and in the presentation of findings. It strikes against all those studies which take refuge in a cursory reference to the way in which "grounded theory" has guided the work of analysis or give the reader a token assurance that rigorous methods of qualitative analysis have been employed. This is not to doubt that the authors of such studies have acted in good faith and attempted to apply the procedures of "grounded theory" in a conscientious manner; but the problem lies in the fact that their use of grounded theory or any other analytical technique sometimes lies largely hidden from view. If one moves to Mishler's perspective of validation as an essentially social process, a much more explicit and detailed account of the process of conducting research and of analysing the material collected is clearly required. In common with any other set of prescriptions for good research practice that have been devised, Mishler's suggestions are not without their problems. For example, there are obviously clear limits on the extent to which visibility of the work can be achieved and represented to others. There also may be a distinct conflict between the need to warrant and make procedures visible and the need in any narrative, be it a research study or a fairy story, to tell a clear, coherent story which is not encumbered with too much detail.

Even after these problems are taken into account, Mishler's perspective on issues of validation and the emphasis that he places on making the work of research visible to others offer a valuable, fresh approach to a very difficult set of problems. However, it does need to be acknowledged that the guidelines Mishler presents in the quotation that was given on a preceding page, although on the surface simple, can be very taxing indeed to implement. An attempt will be made in the rest of this chapter, and in the presentation of material from the study, to make the work of research visible

to readers so that they can make an informed judgement on its trustworthiness and relevance. One of the disadvantages that must be accepted of giving a quite detailed description of research procedures and actions is that the account cannot have as tight and crisp an organisation as a more summary overview of research.

The preceding paragraphs have given a description of the general approach to validation that will be followed in this study. There is also a specific issue concerning validation which needs some discussion. When one focuses in on the stage of analysis and interpretation, the question comes into view of the relationship between the ambitions of a study and the degree of warranting which these ambitions require. This is clearly a central issue, although one that is sometimes overlooked. In his recent writings, Hammersley (1990) has drawn attention to this issue, making distinctions between definitional, descriptive, explanatory and theoretical claims, and pointing out that the nature of the evidence required to support a claim will depend in part on the class to which it belongs.

Concentrating on the present study there appeared to be a number of good reasons for having fairly modest ambitions and for exercising caution in the analysis of the material that was collected. Analysis was not seen in this instance as involving the generation of theoretical concepts – a task which would have required particularly strong warrants to be displayed for claims.

One source of caution was an appreciation of the way in which the perceptions of my informants were situated within, and shaped by, a particular context. I was aware, for example, from my current observations and more general knowledge, that there was a stress within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Edinburgh University on students acting in a collaborative, co-operative way within small groups. By contrast, the general ethos of a Law faculty may well encourage more competitive interaction among participants. Differences in practices and values across institutional contexts will lead to differing sets of perceptions of small group teaching. It therefore seemed necessary to be careful about the scope of any claims that were made in this study – to be suitably tentative about a) how applicable findings might be to other contexts and b) constructing any theoretical framework based on evidence from only one research site.

There were also reasons for circumspection which derive from the nature of the phenomenon being studied. Unlike say the fairly discrete task of reading a particular academic article, interaction in tutorials places an interlocked set of demands of differing types on the individual. Demands such as intellectual engagement with the content of discussion, appropriate articulation of thoughts, self-presentation work, orientation to the interests and needs of others, etc. Quite early on in the stage of analysis I saw that the conventional procedure in qualitative research on learning of attempting to encapsulate the burden of informants' comments within clear, synoptic, analytical categories would not be appropriate or indeed feasible. Analysing material in this manner would have provided only a very pale and *flat* picture of the *dynamic* character of informants' talk about tutorials. Even in considering specific features of tutorials, informants tended to weave closely together into their account a number of different factors. In the case of the staff informants, their contributions often identified tensions between competing purposes and brought to the fore dilemmas in small group teaching. Reducing informants' talk to a set of clear analytical categories would have produced an inappropriately static view of their thoughts and have squeezed too much life and complexity out of the data.

A number of reasons for pursuing a cautious and light-handed approach to the interpretation of findings have been presented in the last two paragraphs. These reasons have been very much bound up with issues of validation; and constitute a case *against* taking too ambitious an approach to analysis and interpretation. However, in the present study there are also good reasons *for* staying close to the informants' own accounts and reining in the researcher's interpretative work. Chapter 2 has demonstrated that researchers have tended to be guided by certain preconceptions concerning the nature of discussion groups. It was also observed that a deficit model view of tutor actions has been prevalent in much of the research on small group teaching. This present study gave the opportunity to break away from this unfortunate history of viewing small group teaching through a framework of preconceptions. There was a wish to avoid as far as possible taking a view formed prior to the study to the material that was collected. Similarly, it seemed important to refrain from imposing any highly developed framework of interpretation on the material. Such an action would have run the risk of hiding the informants' own opinions from direct view.

This does not mean that the study has avoided giving a theoretical perspective on the views that the informants expressed concerning tutorials. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 which report on the interviews have attempted to stay fairly close to the informants' own meanings; and have not tried to derive theory *from* the interview data. However, the final discussion chapter does consider how the theoretical perspectives on talk and social interaction presented in Chapter 3 can be taken *to* some of the findings of the study and be used to frame and illuminate the more 'descriptive' presentation provided in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. This is perhaps a slightly unusual approach to the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data; but it was the one which appeared most suitable for the task in hand.

Since such an "experience near" account (Geertz, 1983) has been viewed by some writers as having dangers and disadvantages, the next section of the chapter will consider and respond to their critique.

Authentic experience?

There has been scepticism among some sociologists, in recent years, about the status of the claims made by researchers who attempt to capture the *experiences* of some group. Silverman, for example, has made a trenchant attack on what he describes as the hint of romanticism to be found in some contemporary qualitative research (Silverman, 1993, p.6). He has claimed that:

> the romantic approach is appealing but dangerous. It may neglect how 'experience' is shaped by cultural forms of representation. For instance, what we think is most personal to us ('guilt', 'responsibility') may be simply a culturally given way of understanding the world .... . So it is problematic to justify research in terms of its 'authentic' representation of 'experience' when what is 'authentic' is culturally defined.
> (ibid.)

Whatever stance one takes towards the argument that Silverman sets out in this quotation, his words, (and in particular his reference to the social construction of emotions), do prompt reflection on *what* we believe individuals' accounts of their experience can tell us about themselves and the world. Should we treat their accounts as a true report of *individual*

experience, construal, of reality or as displays of "culturally given way[s] of understanding the world" (Silverman, 1993, p.6)?

Silverman is certainly correct to point out that any research study which fails to take into account the social shaping of individuals' experience is naïvely romantic. However, some of his rhetorical moves within the quotation, such as "*may be simply a*", suggest that the recognition of the shaping force of social and cultural systems of meaning necessarily implies a devaluing of the authenticity of individual accounts. This implication can certainly be contested; and challenge made of the dualistic opposition Silverman sets up between authentic experience and cultural definition.

An eminently sane response to the question of the relationship between individuals' conceptions of the world around them and the cultural forms of meaning of a particular context and historical epoch has come from Mark Freeman in his book *Rewriting the self* (Freeman, 1993). In discussing the problems that individuals face in interpreting the world and texts, he notes that:

> we must also realize that even if the reality in which we live and think and question and answer is a changeable one, here one epoch and gone the next, it is not on that account any less real. Why should the world have to be transhistorical, transcultural, and so on in order to be proclaimed real? .... there is nothing arbitrary about this situation at all. All that is being said is that we interpret and explain in ways that are more or less consonant with the particular reality we inhabit.
> (Freeman, 1993, p.138-139)

The position that Freeman takes up here in respect to interpretation can be seen to apply equally well to the question of the 'authentic' representation of experience. The fact that individual experience is shaped by a particular cultural system of representing the world does not either make this experience any less real or less susceptible to representation.

The stance on this matter that has been adopted in the analysis of interview material in the present study is straightforward, but I would claim readily defensible. There was an interest in the analysis of interview material in identifying values and perspectives concerning tutorials that were held in common by the majority of informants – in attempting to discern "cultural

forms of representation", to borrow Silverman's phrase. At the same time there was an interest in considering variations between students in both their general accounts of their purposes in discussion groups and their thoughts on specific features of tutorials. Given that this study's focus is on examining a particular area of teaching and learning, rather than on exploring epistemological problems, it did not seem necessary to become too preoccupied with the more philosophical project of fixing the *source* of these variations in individuals' accounts. In other words, it did not appear essential to adopt a view on whether variations between individuals' construals of features of tutorials are best seen as: either uniquely *personal* differences in interpretation or as a selection from a repertoire of possible constructions that were available within a particular culture. What was of significance was to lay open and to take note of the variations in accounts as a matter of interest in itself.

Having set out the position that has been taken on questions of validation and style of analysis, the rest of the chapter will provide a fairly fine-grained description of the work of research; starting with an examination of how the various stages of the interview study relate to observational work that was carried out.

Relationship between interview and observational studies

The sampling of tutors to observe and interview: sampling decision and its rationale

As the Introduction to the Study made clear the interview study which is reported in the present thesis formed part of a wider project that included observational work and the analysis of recordings of tutorial talk. A key methodological decision for both the observational and interview parts of the project was which tutors within the Faculty of Social Sciences to sample. Rather than seeking to select a 'representative' sample, the sampling decision was made very firmly on *theoretical* grounds. The observational part of the study was guided by a wish to observe and to record 'good practice' in the conduct of tutorials. This appeared to be a valuable objective in itself; and it also brought with it some distinct methodological advantages. The first part of the Literature Review noted how past research on tutorials has often used a 'tutor deficit' model to explain findings. Examining the work of individuals who had the reputation of being good practitioners would make the observational work less prone to this particular source of error. Observing 'good practice' also had the advantage at the stage of analysis of reducing the possibility of confounding differences between tutors in skill and experience with differences in approach.

Focusing in on the interviewing work which is central to the thesis, this particular sampling decision can be seen to have advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage is that a more 'representative' sample would have been likely to have revealed a wider variation in tutor views on the purposes and nature of tutorials. Skilful, experienced practitioners may also possess a different *quality* of tutoring experience from their less experienced, or successful, peers. For example, it was noted in Chapter 2 that the tutors interviewed in the present study did not express the face concerns related to the display of subject knowledge that are experienced by 'novice' tutors. It is, therefore, explicitly recognised that very considerable caution needs to be exercised in generalising from the thoughts of a group of 'expert' tutors within one particular faculty in one university to a wider population.

Set against this disadvantage that there might be a narrower variation in views and experience within this group than existed in the population of tutors at large was a corresponding advantage. A group of expert tutors could be expected to act as *key informants* – as skilled and thoughtful practitioners they were particularly well placed to comment in a reflective manner on tutorials and to provide valuable insights. It was also of interest to see whether individuals publicly identified as good tutors did have similar sets of concerns and subscribed to a common way of framing tutorials – whether there was such a thing as a 'tutoring culture'.

The sampling of tutors to observe and interview:
details of the tutors and groups sampled

All of the ten tutors who were selected for the observation and interview studies were based in the Faculty of Social Sciences in Edinburgh University. In a qualitative study where a great deal of interview and observational data was generated, it would have been too ambitious to have drawn a sample more widely across faculties, as might have been possible with a survey methodology. My own knowledge base and its limitations was another important sampling consideration. To be able to provide a reasonably sound interpretation of the actions that were taking place in tutorial talk and of the content of interviews, it appeared important to choose subjects with which I had at least some acquaintance.

My position within the university's centre concerned with staff development and student study skills meant that I was well placed to be able to identify lecturers who had a reputation among colleagues and students as being skilled in facilitating small group discussion. This use of personal knowledge and a network of contacts might appear to some readers as being an insufficiently rigorous method of drawing a sample; but it does have the merit of respecting and using local knowledge and conceptions of what constituted good tutoring rather than being driven by my own preconceptions of how a good tutor *ought* to behave.

I attempted to give a clear general description of the aims of my research to all of the tutors whom I requested to take part in the study. All of the individuals who were approached agreed to participate. The members of

staff involved in the present study, six women and four men, were drawn from the departments of: Accountancy, Economic and Social History, Nursing Studies, Psychology and Sociology. It was possible, therefore, to observe and interview staff and students from disciplines with quite different academic traditions and methodological procedures. The tutorials in Accountancy and a statistics class in Psychology also provided the opportunity to examine groups where discussion centred on problem-solving as opposed to the more general discussion around a topic or paper which featured in the other subjects.

All the tutors within the sample had considerable experience in running small groups. Their experience ranged from that of two individuals who were nearing retirement age to the most recently appointed member of staff in the group who had only four years experience taking groups as a lecturer, but had gained several years of experience of running groups during her period as a postgraduate student. There was a wide range in the academic position held by the staff members who were interviewed and observed from lecturers, through senior lecturers to two professors and one non-professorial head of department.

Although it is not my present purpose to provide a fine-grained description of the observational work that was conducted within the wider project of which this thesis forms a part, it is necessary to explain the way in which this observational work formed a context for the interviews with students and staff. It is also important to give a general description of the groups that were observed as part of the account of how the sample of students for interview was drawn.

A letter was prepared for all of the student participants in the groups which I wished to observe, Appendix A, explaining my research activities and some of my very general purposes in the study. This letter was distributed by each of the ten tutors to the students in their groups. The tutors then requested and obtained permission from the students for me to attend the tutorials as a non-participant observer and to record the proceedings on audio-tape. Once access had been negotiated to the groups, observation took place during the first term, and the early part of the second term of the academic year 1991-92.

The groups observed are listed in Table 4:1. One first year group of students in Economic and Social History was observed in first term led by Tutor 4 and in the second term by Tutor 5, so in all thirteen groups were observed if one focuses only on the student participants, and fourteen if one is counting tutor/ student combinations. For practical reasons, only one session was observed and recorded of the first year remedial statistics class taken by Tutor 10, and no students were drawn for interview from this group. In the case of all the other groups observed, however, I was present for at the very least three group meetings: and in the case of the third year Economic and Social History class followed them through not only tutorials but also 'informal' lectures and computer-lab sessions for almost a whole term. There was a wide range in the size of the individual groups which were observed, from three student participants in each of the 4th year Psychology groups to thirteen in the 3rd year Accountancy tutorial.

I had no direct control over which year groups I could observe. It was not possible, for example, to select equal numbers of first, second, third and fourth year groups to study. My observations were necessarily limited to whatever year groups the individual expert practitioners happened to be tutoring in the academic year 1991-1992. However, as Table 4:1 indicates there was a reasonable spread of year groups across the 13/(14) tutorial groupings that were observed. This allowed me to draw an interview sample from all four years of undergraduate study. Before describing the procedure by which students from eleven groups were invited to take part in an interview, it is appropriate to highlight the value of the observational work in providing a context for both student and staff interviews.

Table 4.1: Tutorial groups which were observed

Tutor 1	Tutor 2	Tutor 3
Psychology 1st year group & 4th year group	Psychology 1st year group & 4th year group	Sociology 2nd year group
Tutor 4 Economic & Social History 1st year group * & 2nd year group	Tutor 5 Economic & Social History 1st year group * & 1st year group	Tutor 6 Economic & Social History 3rd year group
Tutor 7 Nursing Studies 3rd year group	Tutor 8 Nursing Studies group containing 3rd and 4th years	Tutor 9 Accountancy 3rd year group
Tutor 10 Psychology 'remedial' tutorial in statistics 1st year group		

* The same starred 1st year group was observed led by both Tutor 4 and Tutor 5

Ways in which the observation work assisted the different stages of the interview study

The presence of a researcher in any educational setting will always have an effect on the nature of the interactions that take place in that setting. In order to minimise the effects of my presence within tutorials groups, I adopted a field role where I attempted to be unobtrusive. It seemed important not only for my own research purposes, but also to respect the students' rights to have a smoothly running tutorial, to reduce the effects of my presence as much as possible. At the same time I attempted to give a clear account to the student participants of my general research purposes so that they could give informed consent to my presence in their midst. The work of observation was greatly assisted by the fact that the ten tutors adopted a welcoming, friendly attitude towards me, which communicated itself to the student participants. Indeed in groups which I observed over a period of weeks, my presence appeared to become an accepted, commonplace part of the tutorial. As skilled and confident practitioners, the ten tutors did not appear to find an observer inhibiting or disruptive. Acceptance of my presence and the ability to act as a 'fly on the wall' might have been more problematic if I had observed groups run by tutors who were less secure about their teaching skills and subject knowledge.

The observation work proved a very valuable guide to the task of deciding which topics should be explored within the student and staff interviews. The review of past research on small group teaching and of relevant theoretical perspectives suggested areas that it would be necessary, or at least profitable, to explore. However, past research could only act as a very general guide; and the observational work gave me a much sharper sense of the lines of questioning that it would be appropriate to pursue in this particular research site. Aside from its use in shaping the selection of topics for focused interviews, the knowledge that I acquired about individual students from the observation work, (albeit fairly limited in some cases), was of value. It assisted me to formulate questions for, and to respond appropriately to, individual student informants. It also needs to be acknowledged that the students' awareness that I had at least a general sense of their patterns of participation in, and preparation for, tutorials may have had a considerable influence on the content of their comments.

In more recent years there has been an increasing appreciation of the importance of the interpersonal aspects of interviewing (e.g., Oakley, 1981) and a recognition that successful interviewing involves more than technical issues of appropriate techniques and procedures. Being present with the students in tutorials over a period of at the very least a few weeks, and often chatting with them informally before and after the tutorial, meant that they had become accustomed to my presence and person. Although the degree of acquaintance between the students and myself may have been limited, the interviews at least were not a one-off meeting between complete strangers, as is sometimes the case in research studies. It could be argued that getting to know students during the period of the observations made for a more informal and involved atmosphere in the interview and for a less 'hierarchical' relationship.

Observation work and later study of the transcripts of tutorial talk also proved of great benefit at the stage of analysing, interpreting, the student and tutor interview transcripts. At a general level, the information that I gained and the understandings that developed from several months of observational work clearly influenced the analysis of the texts of both tutor and student interviews. Observation of day-to-day practice also provided me with specific contextual information which was of value in guiding my reading of the statements of individual informants.

It is a recognised difficulty in qualitative research that while the information that is gained, in an explicit and more tacit manner from immersion in a social setting can be very valuable for the interpretation of interview material, it is very difficult indeed to make this information available to the reader of findings (Powney and Watts, 1987). Attempts are made at some points in the presentation of material from the student and tutor interviews to provide contextual information that is necessary to make an appropriate interpretation of individual quotations. However, as in other qualitative studies, there are constraints on the extent to which contextual information that guided the analysis of interview material can be opened up to the reader. These constraints, such as the need to present a clear intelligible account which is not excessively burdened by asides and supporting detail, mean that much 'background knowledge' must remain unavailable.

The preceding section of this chapter has highlighted the advantages for the process of interviewing and of analysis that flowed from having observed the tutorial groups. Towards the end of my period of observation of eleven of the groups I asked the student participants to volunteer to come to discuss their views on tutorials with me; and gave them a brief indication of the topics that might be covered in the interview. In all fifty two students came along to take part in an interview. Table 4.2 presents the number of volunteers and the total number of participants for each of these eleven tutorial groups[1]. It will be seen from Table 4.2 that the response rate was satisfactory, with the marked exception of a Psychology and an Economic and Social History first year class. In both of these cases there proved to be considerable practical problems in arranging interviews at appropriate times which account in large part for the poor response rate.

Table 4.2: Numbers of student informants by tutorial group/ size of each tutorial group

Subject	Year group	Tutor	Number of informants	Size of group
Psychology	4th	1	3	3
Psychology	1st	1	4	5/(6)
Psychology	4th	2	2	3
Psychology	1st	2	2	10
Sociology	2nd	3	7	9
Ec. & Soc. Hist.	2nd	4	8	10
Ec. & Soc. Hist.	1st	4/5	3	10
Ec. & Soc. Hist.	3rd	6	7	9
Nursing Studies	3rd	7	4	6
Nursing Studies	3rd/4th	8	4	6
Accountancy	3rd	9	9	13

[1] A careful reading of the table will reveal that the number of respondents seems to add up to 53. This reflects the fact that one student who was interviewed was present both in the Sociology and in the Economic and Social History 2nd year group. It also needs to be noted when considering the breakdown of students interviewed by year group that a second or third year course tutorial might contain within it students in a higher year of study.

Considering the eleven groups as a whole there was a marked gender imbalance in favour of women in the number of participants. Observing Nursing Studies groups, where all the participants were female, clearly contributed to this imbalance; but much of it appears to have arisen purely by chance. The gender imbalance in the groups themselves is reflected in the proportion of women to men who were interviewed. There were 21 male and 31 female informants. Breaking down the figures of students interviewed by year of undergraduate study: 9 were in first year, 11 in second year, 23 in third year and 9 in fourth year. There were six mature students in the group who were interviewed: three women and three men.

One worry that I had concerning a sample gained by asking for volunteers was that there might be a disproportionate number of students who were active participants and that the quieter members of groups might be under-represented. Fortunately, this did not prove to be the case, as I could verify both from my observations and from the comments that students made themselves concerning their participation in groups.

Content of the interviews

General style of the interviews

Now that the close connections between the interviews and observational work in a particular context have been outlined and the nature of the tutor and student sample described, attention can be focused on the actual content of the interviews themselves. The interviews aimed to encourage informants to comment on specific aspects of tutorials which appeared from my own perspective as researcher to be of particular interest. The specific aspects which informants were requested to focus on are listed later in this section along with a rationale for their inclusion. However, as the following section of this chapter on the process of interviewing will make clear, there was no desire to have interviews that were totally dominated by the researcher's own agenda of topics. As one means of achieving a slightly better balance between researcher and informant control of the topics of discussion, general, very open-ended questions were included within the interviews. Too much researcher control would have defeated the general aims of the

study to identify perspectives on small group teaching that were common to most of the respondents and to describe variations between students in their reactions to tutorials.

The general approach taken in the interview does not exactly match any of the ideal types presented in the literature on interviewing. However, it does correspond fairly closely with much of the description that Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1956) give of *focused interviews*. The interviews involved as Merton and his colleagues suggest a "prior analysis of the situation in which subjects have been involved" (Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1956, p.4). The preceding section of the chapter has indicated some of the ways in which observation of tutorials guided the work of interviewing; and this is a theme which will be pursued further in the current section. (At the same time it needs to be noted that students in the interviews were not asked to concentrate specifically on the tutorials in which they had been observed but to comment freely about their experience of tutorials throughout their undergraduate career.) The interview design also followed Merton's prescriptions in requesting specific comments on a wide range of aspects of the phenomenon that is being studied. In addition there was a concern to follow Merton's advice to assist informants to reflect on their experiences in some *depth*, to adopt an interviewing style which would help informants to portray their feelings and evaluations rather than simply give a bare, more descriptive, report.

The interview guide for the student interviews consisted of a listing of topics, (see below), that it was hoped to explore with informants. It seemed inappropriate to specify my actions within individual interviews beyond this general level of topic choice for a number of different reasons. One important consideration was that specifying my own actions in some detail in advance of the interviews would considerably reduce the extent to which the informants could control the *direction* in which they wished to pursue topics. An attempt to 'standardise' my own procedures across interviews would also have been markedly inconsistent with the view of talk, social interaction and the local, situated construction of meaning advanced in Chapter 3. Even had a standardisation of procedure been desired, (which it most certainly was not), a considerable amount of research evidence clearly indicates that it is an unattainable ideal (e.g. Brenner, 1981). Summarising a

review of studies of interviewer reliability in standard surveys, Mishler notes that these studies "indicate that 25-40 percent of the questions asked by interviewers depart significantly from the wording of the questions in the schedule." (Mishler, 1986, p.44).

In summary my aim in the interviews was to approach topics in a sequence which was appropriate to the emergent themes in the talk of particular participants and without any rigid prespecification of question form. Any careful prestructuring on my part would have ignored the dialogic nature of an interview – reducing informants' control over how they defined the topic and possibly hindering their efforts to construct meaning.

Content of the student interviews

Turning to look at the content of the student interviews, Table 4.3 gives an unstructured list of the main topics which were explored in the interviews with the student informants. The following section of the review will attempt to give a description of the *manner* in which these topics, and issues raised by the students themselves, were discussed.

The topics listed in Table 4.3 fall into a number of main types:

- those designed to act as prompts to participants' reflections on tutorials, (e.g., likes/dislikes),
- those eliciting background/orienting factors,
- those addressing specific key dimensions of small-group pedagogy and interaction.

Table 4. 3: Main topics explored in the interviews with students

- inviting comments
- likes
- dislikes
- subjects studied during their time at university
- what helps, what hinders, their personal participation
- what makes it easy or difficult to listen actively in tutorials
- formal or informal atmosphere in the group, and how that affects learning
- any relevant school experience?
- reactions to tutors' direct questions
- reactions to tutors' 'clarifying' questions
- preparation for tutorials
- connections with other parts of the course, in particular the lectures
- sufficient opportunity in tutorials to explore personal problems in understanding?
- preference for more focused or for more wide-ranging discussion
- reactions to other students' contributions / likes, dislikes
- willingness to debate a point with other students
- questions concerning tutorials where students themselves are asked to present a short paper
- quantity and quality of advice given in tutorials on reading, essay-writing, exam preparation
- communication skills development and tutorials
- exploring whether tutorials have any social benefits
- memories of first tutorials
- for second and subsequent year students perceptions of change over time
- preferred size of tutorial group
- note taking in tutorials

It will be seen from Table 4.3, that a simple but important matter was to gain a description from the students of the subjects which they had studied during their time at university. This allowed me at the stage of analysis to consider how the reactions of individual students might have been shaped by the specific disciplines and departments which they had encountered. Discovering early in the interview what subjects students had followed during the course of their degree was also of assistance within the interview in the formulation of questions. Moving on from this item of 'background' information, to the substantive issues covered in the interview, the topics listed in Table 4.3 vary considerably in their scope. Some are very general and open-ended in form such as the items which request students to comment on: their likes; their dislikes; what helps, what hinders, their personal participation; and what makes it easy or difficult to listen actively in tutorials. It was important to gain a clear sense of students' views on all of these matters; and at the same time these general, open-ended questions had the advantage of allowing students considerable scope to define and pursue their own individual concerns. Past research on small group teaching has tended to concentrate on questions related to participation, with the consequent danger of presenting an unbalanced picture of communication by neglecting the student's role as a listener as well as a participant. In asking about what makes it easy or difficult to listen actively in tutorials there was an attempt to avoid this 'one-sided' view of communication.

Turning to slightly more specific areas of inquiry, both of the Literature review chapters have demonstrated that group *atmosphere* and how that affects learning is a central theoretical and practical issue in small group teaching. It was, therefore, essential to include this topic in the interviews within the current study. Raising the matter of group atmosphere also gave students an entry point to go on if they wished to explore other aspects of group process and interaction. In addition to examining the more interpersonal aspects of group functioning, students were invited to comment on the style in which they wished discussion to be structured. They were asked whether they had a preference for a more focused or for a more wide-ranging discussion. Chapter 2 highlighted the variation that exists between individuals in their *styles* of learning and pointed out the problems that may arise if there is a serious mismatch between the learning style of a student and the learning/teaching style of a lecturer or tutor.

Previous research on small-group teaching has only given some scattered insights into students' stylistic preferences concerning the structuring of discussion; and it therefore appeared desirable to look at this matter in a more systematic fashion within the present study.

Previous research and my own observations have revealed that much of tutor talk with students is cast in the form of questions. Taking account of this finding, the 'tutor-focused' topics of inquiry centred on gaining a picture of how students reacted to direct questions posed by a tutor and to tutors' use of 'clarifying' questions. In addition, it was anticipated that much information on how students saw the role and authority of the tutor would be gained incidentally as they responded to all of the items within the topic set and also talked through matters which were of particular interest to them personally.

Although it was vital to obtain students' views on tutor questioning and other areas of tutor activity, a tutor dominated agenda for discussion in the interview would have been inappropriate. To avoid this danger, the topic guide for the interviews contained items that asked the students to talk about their expectations, beliefs about, and actions towards other student participants. Students were given a very general invitation to talk about their likes and dislikes concerning other students' contributions. Aside from this general invitation, there was also a very specific question concerning other students. My observations had revealed that even in groups where there was friendly and engaged interaction, students challenged each other on intellectual points less frequently than the advocates of small group teaching would consider desirable. Accordingly it seemed that it would be valuable to explore with the students the question of how willing, or not, they were to debate a point with another student. Aside from its intrinsic interest, this question also proved in practice to be a useful way in to the matter of how informants thought about aspects of face and facework.

Chapter 2 pointed out the need to give attention to the ways in which tutorials may be shaped by the wider learning system in which they are situated. It was also noted that: "Participants' perceptions of tutorials will similarly be influenced by the whole teaching/learning system in which they are located, not simply by features of tutorials themselves." Taking these

points into account, the interview guide included the topic of gaining a sense of how students saw the links between the lectures and tutorials on the courses they had encountered. Another topic examined with students was the extent to which they saw tutorials as a forum where problems in any area of course content might be explored. Asking for comment on preparation for tutorials brought into focus the relationship between other academic work demands and work done for tutorials. Students were also provided with an opportunity to give their perceptions of the quantity and quality of advice they had received from tutors on reading, essay-writing, exam preparation and other aspects of studying. Recognising that there is more to university life than books and labs, students were asked for their opinion on whether tutorials, (particularly during first year), have any social benefits such as allowing one to meet people.

In addition to looking at how students saw the relationship between tutorials and some other aspects of the higher education system, the interviews touched on connections between school experience and tutorial performance. The informants were asked a very specific question on the extent to which their school had prepared them for the experience of taking part in discussion groups at university. This theme of relevant prior experience and of expectations concerning how discussion would proceed was continued in a question which asked informants to describe how they found their first few tutorials. It was anticipated that asking second and subsequent years to remember their early tutorials might lead them to give contrasting 'then' and 'now' perspectives on their experience of discussion groups. There was also a more explicit attempt made to allow informants to give their perceptions of changes over time. Students in their second and subsequent years were requested to talk through any changes in approach or style that they had noticed over the years.

A rather miscellaneous group of topics within the interview guide were united by a concern to gain information which might provide some simple pointers to good practice. This group of items sought student views on matters such as: tutorials where students themselves are asked to present a short paper, preferred size of tutorial group and note-taking within tutorials.

Taking an overview of the question areas that have been discussed in some detail in the preceding paragraphs, the interview guide was designed to include quite specific subjects which were of particular interest and more general, open-ended areas of inquiry where the student informants could exercise somewhat more control over the shaping of the topic under discussion. The topic areas included in the guide invited student comment on:- aspects of group processes; their individual perspective – likes and dislikes; tutors; other students; connections between tutorials and other aspects of university life; and matters which might give pointers to good tutoring practice.

The content of the interviews with the tutors

Moving on to consider the content of the interviews that took place with staff informants, it did not appear appropriate to follow the method of presentation adopted in the last section for the student interviews and to list the main topics in the form of a table. The following paragraphs will describe how a core of topics featured in all of the staff interviews; but at the same time there was a greater variety in the matters covered within the staff interviews compared to the student interviews.

This greater variability across interviews was in large part the product of a conscious decision. It was not likely that many of the student informants would have spent much time thinking carefully through their position on various aspects of tutorials. It therefore struck me as important to provide them with a series of topics which would assist them to focus their thoughts and to formulate positions. However, a very different set of circumstances applied with the staff informants. As expert practitioners they could be expected to have thought through issues concerning group teaching and to have formulated distinct views on a variety of matters. Consequently it seemed both less necessary and less desirable to have as clear cut a researcher agenda as was the case with the student interviews.

There were a number of key matters which it seemed appropriate to pursue with all of the tutors; and then a wider pool of items which could be pursued according to the interests of the individual and the time available. Another general consideration in the design of the staff interviews was the desire to

have some common ground with the topic set for the student interviews. However, given the different status and functions of staff and student participants in discussion groups it was judged unwise to seek too exact a correspondence between the two topic sets.

One key matter explored across almost all of the interviews was the tutors' perceptions of the extent and nature of any changes that there had been locally in small group teaching over the years. Allowing for the possibility that there might have been a fair amount of change over time, it was recognised that the staff members might be able to give a valuable historical perspective on small-group teaching. For whatever reason, this line of inquiry yielded a somewhat more meagre collection of comments than had been anticipated and consequently it is not reported in detail in Chapter 7. As well as this general request for reflections on change over time, a quite specific question concerning perceptions of change was put to most of the tutors. They were asked whether they had found the presence of an increasing number of mature students in the faculty had brought about any changes in discussion groups.

All the tutors were asked in a very open-ended way about when they felt satisfied and dissatisfied – as a matter that was of considerable interest in itself and as a suitable entry point for an exploration of how they defined a good or bad tutorial. Chapter 7 will show that there was remarkable uniformity in the way in which tutors talked about the features of a good and satisfying tutorial and in what they considered to be a 'bad', dissatisfying performance on their own part.

My observations of the tutorial groups alerted me to the fact that there were very large differences, (even for the same tutor), in the purpose and nature of tutor-student interaction in first year discussion groups as opposed to fourth year groups. It seemed necessary, therefore, to raise with the tutors, if the topic did not occur in the course of discussion, the questions of differences between year groups and any adaptations in style and approach that they put in place to take account of any differences which they perceived.

The studies of Abercrombie and Terry (1978) and of Rudduck (1978), reviewed in Chapter 2, gave some insight into the difficulties of small group

teaching as seen from the tutor's standpoint. It was also a key matter in the present study to give all of the staff informants a chance to discuss what they saw as the difficulties of tutoring.

Although the topic of changes observed over time brought fewer comments than was anticipated, considering the effect that specific changes might have proved to be a very rich source of material. A topic discussed with almost all of the staff informants was how they would react to the formal assessment of student performance in tutorials. In reacting to this question members of staff not only expressed their views on the question of assessment itself but also incidentally revealed some of the core values and purposes which guided their current efforts.

Reactions to another possible change were also sought during the course of the individual interviews. Chapter 2 noted that the Government's attempts to promote an 'enterprise culture' had led in recent years to an increase of interest in some quarters in the development of students' oral communication skills. It went on to observe that there is now the possibility for tutors: "of continuing to focus on the humanistic ideal of the cultivation of judgement and acculturation into the ways of academic debate or of giving more attention to the utilitarian purpose of preparing students for the demands of the workplace." Given that there might be a tension for tutors between these competing aims, it seemed important to discuss with the informants how they reacted to the idea that more attention could be focused in tutorials on the matter of enabling students to develop their oral "communication skills". As a separate line of enquiry, tutors were also asked for their thoughts about seminars, i.e. tutorials where students themselves are required to present a short paper.

One important purpose in the interviews with the staff members was to attempt to capture aspects of good practice. Accordingly staff members were asked to talk about any general strategies, or particular tactics of questioning that they used which seemed to work well. Clearly there are distinct limits on the extent to which individuals can articulate their, often tacit, understandings of their skilled practical performance; but it did seem useful to hear about successful strategies and tactics which were consciously pursued.

When time and an appropriate occasion in the conversation permitted, tutors were asked for their reactions to, and ways of approaching, particular difficult tasks, such as dealing with 'dominant' students, facilitating the participation of shy, anxious students and dealing with a lack of preparation by students. Some tutors were also asked to indicate the ways in which they conducted the initial meetings of a new tutorial group and attempted to ensure that a secure foundation was laid for successful group interaction.

As in the student interviews, there was an attempt to look with a number of the staff informants at the relation between tutorials and other aspects of a course, including principally the lectures but also matters such as whether they saw tutorials as being a forum for providing advice on written work.

In addition to the topics listed in the preceding paragraphs, there were quite a number of items in the interview guide for the staff informants that were designed for specific informants rather than for the group as a whole. An example of a topic which fell into this category was questions related to the use of sub-groups within a tutorial. These questions were not particularly appropriate for the majority of informants who made no use of sub-groups. Another example of a topic which was designed for particular informants was the exploration with the Accountancy and the Nursing Studies tutors of how the demands of preparation for a specific profession affected the work that was done in tutorials.

To recap on the content of the staff interviews, this section of the chapter has highlighted the key issues which I attempted to address with all of the staff informants and also many other topics which were pursued where appropriate. In addition it needs to be noted that the planning of the interviews was guided by the assumption that certain key matters such as group atmosphere and students' face-concerns would arise naturally in the course of discussion rather than in response to a direct prompt on my part. Fortunately this assumption proved to be correct. As the following section on *The process of interviewing* will reveal, the staff interviews were also guided by the conscious intention not to be driven too much by the research agenda that has been set out in the preceding paragraphs but to follow topics which the tutors themselves initiated and regarded as important.

The process of interviewing: student informants

The beginning of this chapter focused attention on "respondents' problems" as well as "investigators' problems" and thereby highlighted the need to consider the extent to which informants were given an opportunity to construct a coherent, meaningful account of their experiences. The stress that has been placed in Chapter 3 on the collaborative nature of talk and the local negotiation of meaning also points to the importance of giving some account of the actual process of interviewing. The discussion that follows in the next few pages looks first at the student interviews, and then draws in some points of contrast between the student and staff interviews.

Before setting out on the description of how the student interviews were conducted, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that for this sample of social science students an interview was much less of a strange situation than it would be for many groups of informants. Indeed a few students showed a genuine academic interest in the process of interviewing; and quite a number had questions for me after the interview itself relating to the methods that I was following in my study.

Turning to the interviews themselves, after some general, introductory conversation I informed the students about the types of writing where their individual comments and collective thoughts might appear. I assured them that I would not make use of their comments in any way which would allow them to be identified individually; and more generally would respect the confidentiality of this interview. In introducing the interviews I tried to be honest about my own 'agenda'. I indicated at the beginning of each interview that there were particular aspects of tutorials that I would like to hear their thoughts on – that it was very much an opportunity for them to express their views on these specific topics and other matters that they wanted to raise. I said that if they themselves did not consider that these questions made sense to them, or were irrelevant to them, they should say so very clearly. I also stated in each interview that if a student felt that I had posed a question which seemed too general in its form, she or he should make it more specific in ways which seemed appropriate. These introductory statements to the students were guided by my desire as a researcher to have considerable control over the *choice* of the general topics

that were discussed, but not to constrain the *direction* in which informants chose to develop these topics. It also needs to be noted that within the interviews when students were providing an account of areas which were not on my own list of topics to investigate they were encouraged to proceed.

This wish to focus the student on certain areas but not to inhibit exploration within these areas also very much influenced my questioning technique. In asking initial questions about an aspect of tutorials I attempted to cast the questions in a fairly open-ended form which would not constrain the direction of the student's answer. Looking at the transcripts quite a number of the initial questions that I asked were 'balanced' in their form, for example including the phrase "or not". Once a student got going on talking through an issue, I can be seen from the transcripts to operate in two, different modes. In one mode I can be seen to be actively encouraging their speech, by back-channel responses and other means, but making no contribution myself to the content. During such passages then the content of the interview and the pace at which it was developed were set to a very large degree by the informant her or himself.

However, it should be noted that I was aware, from my own experience as a counsellor, of the dangers that may arise from being too enthusiastic in one's efforts to encourage an informant to construct a narrative of his or her experience. Encouraging responses and silences on the interviewer's part can be subtly coercive, leading informants to pursue topics which they do not see as relevant, or topics which have not been framed in a way that is appropriate for that individual. Accordingly when it was clear from his or her initial response that an informant did not see my question as an appropriate stimulus to reflection and talk, there was no attempt made to pursue the matter. The following extract succinctly illustrates an exchange of this type:

CA What makes listening easier, what makes it harder do you think?

St33 [laughs]

CA If that's too big a question, just (St33:No) say.

St33 No, I don't think I can answer that.

CA OK. That, that's fine. I don't want you to [CA very slight laugh], if it doesn't make sense, it doesn't make sense.

In my second mode, I can often be seen taking a more active role, making requests for disambiguation and for expansion and being thereby much more involved in the creation of the content of the interview. To establish common understanding within the interview and to reduce problems at the stage of the analysis of interview material, I sometimes presented students with my reading of what they had just been saying for comment. Usually I would preface these readings with a commentary on why I was doing this – for example, I would apologise for being pedantic but say that I wanted to be sure that I had got their meaning right. It seemed important to make my own intention clear so that the students could see my interest in what they had to say *and* not attribute my reading to any failure on their own part. A very important benefit of these active attempts to secure mutual understanding, to 'disambiguate' the students' utterances, was that they almost inevitably led students to elaborate on the topic under discussion. My requests for clarification, etc., acted as stimuli to thinking, positions with which the students could interact.

At some places in the interviews disambiguation is too neutral a term to use for the very active way in which the student informant and myself worked together to create an account of some feature of tutorials or some aspect of their experience. A particularly strenuous and interactive effort to achieve understanding is demonstrated in the following extract. (A following section of this chapter will describe the approach to transcription and transcription conventions which were adopted in the study.)

St13 Yeah, and I think also people. It's all very well saying to people sort of ask whatever questions you want but very often when you come to university, you don't know what questions you want to ask. (CA: Sure) So there'll be some embarrassed silence and somebody'd, say, ask when the next exams were. But that wasn't the information that we really needed to know.

CA Yeah, so are you suggesting that, that exploring problems needs to be a bit more interactive?

St13 Mmh. Mmh.

CA You need someone to help you shape a problem. I don't want to put words in your mouth but is that (St13: Yeah) sort of what[you
St13/ / [And maybe less conventional approaches as well if you have a tutor who'll, who'll sit there and talk more generally about the course and sort of aspects rather than sort of sit there and say, "Well ask me any questions".

CA Mmh. You feel that's not a good enough opener, to, to get things going?

St13 Not in first year, no. I mean, by the second year as long as you've got a sort of fairly open (CA: Yeah) tutor, that's fine.

CA I mean. Well, one thrust I'm taking from what you're saying there is you feel there's not a sufficient opportunity to explore particular problems. (St13: Mmh [confirmatory]) Is that right?

St13 Yeah. But it's hard as well to talk generally because again so much of it depends on the tutor's personality.

CA Sure. I take that on board. (St13: Mmh) You feel that, that aspect as well as others has varied (St13: Mmh[confirmatory]) a lot from tutorial to tutorial.

As well as giving a flavour of the more interactive parts of the student interviews, this extract has also served the purpose of presenting data that will be mined for discussion in Chapter 6.

I would claim that the distinction drawn in the last few paragraphs between two modes of interviewing practice gives a clear general picture of my actions in the interviews with the student informants. However, it would be wrong and misleading to suggest that these modes were applied in a mechanistic manner or always with conscious intent. A very one-sided view of the interviews would be given also if attention is only focused on the general variations that existed within my own interviewing practice. Differences in the nature of the interaction between interviews that arose more from the experience, characteristics and habits of speech of individual informants must also be recognised. When one reads across the whole set of interviews, these differences leap from the page. Of necessity my own responses and questions were shaped to meet the *immediate* needs to interact appropriately and collaboratively with a particular individual as well as by an overall interviewing strategy.

One very important source of variation across the interviews derived not from personal characteristics of the informants themselves nor from differences in how they related with me as an interviewer but simply from their *quantity* of experience of tutorials and of university life in general. In Scottish universities a first degree with honours in the Social Sciences is taken over a period of four years; and in each of the first two years of the degree students take three different subjects. Accordingly by the time that they reach third or fourth year they have a fairly wide experience of tutorials in different subjects and of the differing personal styles of tutors. There was a marked contrast, therefore, in the quantity of tutorial experience possessed by the fourth year students whom I interviewed and the first years who were only in their second term at university at the time of interview. This variation in experience of tutorials and of university life in general shows through very clearly in the interview transcripts. It is not surprising that in general the first year students gave much shorter responses and a thinner account of their experiences in tutorials than informants in their second or subsequent year. The interviews with some of the first year students were just under thirty minutes in length. The length of the interviews with students in their second and subsequent years was somewhat variable. Most of these interviews lasted between thirty-five to forty minutes, although there were quite a few which were over an hour in length.

Returning from this observation on the variation that existed across interviews to describe general aspects of the content and process of the interviews, the closing section usually contained a general invitation to students to comment on matters which they saw as particularly relevant. The wording of this request varied quite a bit from interview to interview, but here is one example of its formulation:

> that's most of the things that I wanted (St47: Hmm) to ask about, [Student 47], but clearly I don't want just to (St47: Yeah), confine the interview to, to the main areas of interest I had, so if you feel there are areas that I've not covered, or you know thoughts about tutorials that have been going through your mind, there are points that you very much want to highlight as being particularly important to you, then if you'd like to talk about that.

It was not common for this invitation to lead to the introduction of new material; and often informants responded by saying that they felt that they

had had the opportunity to express their views. There were quite a number of cases, however, where informants replied to this request by summarising some of their earlier contributions and giving a clear statement of what they saw as central issues.

To recap, this section of the chapter has set out to describe: how I communicated my intentions in the interviews to informants and particular features of interviewing strategy, style and decisions. It is hoped that this account will give readers information which will enable them to judge what I referred to earlier as the trustworthiness of my way of working and the extent to which it gave the informants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and construct views on aspects of tutorials.

Although it has been possible to describe a number of features of the interviews, sometimes in a fairly detailed way, it is a much more difficult matter to give the reader any lifelike, reliable picture of the atmosphere of the interviews: to display how some felt livelier than others, a few involved a serious, intense exploration of issues while others examined matters in a more light-hearted way. These elusive qualities of the personal style of individual informants can be noted, but are very difficult to illustrate. A few comments can be made, however, about my own feelings and the nature of my engagement with the informants. I very much wanted to hear the students' views and to know more about certain topics. This engagement with my own research interests and interest in the informants as individuals made me feel very involved in the interviews and led me to find most of them enjoyable encounters, not just a research task.

The process of interviewing: staff informants

Looking now at aspects of the process of interviewing the staff informants, the literature on 'peer interviewing' often presents it as a practice which is fraught with potential problems (e.g., Powney and Watts, 1987). The following sections of this chapter, *Stance as observer and analyst* and *"Too much of a native", "too detached"?* will address wider methodological questions concerning the interviewing of colleagues. As well as pointing to possible methodological problems associated with peer interviewing, the literature suggests that interviewing colleagues may be the source of interpersonal

awkwardnesses and difficulties. However, this was not my own experience. Before setting out on this present study I already knew two of the informants well and was friendly with them. The other informants were known to me to at least a slight degree. This social acquaintance with the staff informants and the fact that we possessed in common a considerable amount of knowledge about teaching and learning within the Faculty of Social Sciences aided the process of interviewing. This common ground of knowledge and acquaintance made it easier for me to frame questions in an appropriate manner and for us both to signal our understanding of each other's contributions.

A fairly full description has been given of many of the *process* features of the student interviews. Rather than exhaustively listing the very many similarities that existed between the conduct of the staff and student interviews, it seemed more appropriate to highlight points of contrast. As a preceding section of the chapter has indicated, the interviews with staff were guided by the conscious intention not to be driven too much by my own research agenda but to follow topics which the tutors themselves initiated and regarded as important. The staff informants, therefore, had rather more topic choice than the students and there was correspondingly a somewhat greater variability between the staff interviews in the content areas that were covered. The interview with one tutor lasted just under an hour, and an interview with another tutor just over an hour. For the rest of the staff informants, the interviews were at least an hour and a half in length.

From my perspective as interviewer, the staff interviews were in some respects less demanding than the student ones. The staff respondents were for a start well accustomed to producing an extended, coherent account of their thoughts on some topic and clearly did not require the degree of encouragement and assistance given to some of the student informants. Often members of staff required only minimal responses from myself to continue to produce a lengthy turn of talk. As a tutor's turn at talk increased in length, so often did the complexity of the content. They added finer meanings or introduced opposing themes into their account. When a question or prompt of my own had successfully acted as a stimulus to a sustained flow of comment it was important to show my interest and involvement but to stay firmly in the background. I attempted to discipline

myself to stay in this role of involved listener on occasions where it was appropriate. At times, however, there was a need to adopt a more active role; and the transcripts show me working closely with an informant who is wrestling to make sense of a particular topic. The transcripts also show me at times attempting to disambiguate tutors' utterances, making sure that we have achieved common reference. Possibly in part because we shared more common ground, this process of disambiguation felt intellectually less of a challenge with the staff informants than it did with the students. With the students it required more imagination and a fine-grained attention to the details of their statements to establish common reference. There was also a concern with students to get the interpersonal aspects of the transaction right: to be tentative and exploratory in presenting interpretations of what they had said – to avoid imposing on them readings of their statements. In interviewing colleagues this was a less salient concern. I was well aware that they were able to challenge and politely correct any misinterpretations that I might make of their statements.

To summarise the discussion that has been provided in the past few paragraphs, interviewing the tutors was a task which differed somewhat from that of interviewing the students. It was also a task which I found easier in some respects. In interviewing the tutors I did not need to take on as large a share of the responsibility for the success of the interaction as I did with the students.

Analysis: issues and procedures

Stance as observer and analyst

An earlier section of the chapter has talked about the social relationships that existed between myself and the staff and student participants. In this section I want to attend to a different aspect of the relationship between myself and the informants in my study – the stance which I took towards them as an observer of their actions and an analyst of their statements. The first part of the literature review described the effect that the early work on small group teaching by Abercrombie and others has had in shaping the interests and preconceptions of later writers and researchers. It was argued that, guided

by a particular ideal of what *should* be happening in tutorials, researchers have seen situations where tutors and students fail to live up to this ideal as evidence of deficiencies and the need for reform. This strikes me as an unhelpful and inappropriately judgmental way of going about educational research; and in this present study I have attempted to avoid taking a deficit model view of tutor and student actions and conceptions. The avowedly critical stance taken towards the values and positions of informants in some discourse analytic studies (Burman and Parker, 1993) similarly appeared to be an undesirable way to conduct analysis. It is clearly quite impossible to 'control' completely for the effects that one's own values have on the reading and analysis of interview texts; but the intention that guided my analysis was to stay focused as much as possible on informants' own ways of construing the world rather than judging them in terms of my own preconceptions and values.

The stance that I attempted to adopt as analyst and observer is akin to the position which Hansen (1993) took up in his study of teaching style. Hansen describes in his 1993 article how he sought to perceive the work of the teachers whom he was observing:

> sympathetically, in Dewey's (1932: 130) sense of that term when he describes an 'impartial sympathetic observer'. At first glance, the phrase 'impartial sympathy' appears to constitute an oxymoron. However, Dewey meant to call attention both to the value and to the effort involved in appreciating the moral dimension of what people do. His terms describe an interpretive posture in which one attempts to understand another person's actions in the light of a sense of the underlying aims and purposes that animate them, rather than in the light of, say, the aims and purposes the observer believes he/she (or others in that position) ought to have. To adopt such a posture is not a simple matter, for, as Dewey also makes clear, it does not involve merely endorsing or apologizing for others' conduct.
> (Hansen, 1993, p.401)

Turning to another aspect of researcher stance, there was also no assumption on my own part that my position as an educational researcher provided me with a uniquely privileged, 'expert', viewpoint on the data that I had collected. A later section of this chapter will describe how I saw taking a draft chapter back to the staff informants as very much a matter of open negotiation.

"Too much of a native", "too detached"?

A critic of my work might concede that my attempt to define clearly my stance as researcher towards my informants was laudable, but question another aspect of my relationship as researcher with my informants. It might be claimed that as a tutor myself in higher education for the last eight years and as someone involved in the training of novice tutors I am too much of a native to be able to look at the tutor interview transcripts with a clear-sighted, impartial eye. A particularly determined critic might also ask whether meeting the individual students who were interviewed over a period of time in tutorials and a very long period of immersion in the transcripts of their interviews has led me to 'go native' in the sense of being preoccupied with the students' expressed concerns.

The only fully honest response to such charges is, I believe, to admit that there are distinct limitations on reflexivity and that readers of the thesis may be better placed to judge this matter than I am myself. It is certainly possible that an outsider from her or his more detached perspective might have seized on features of informants' accounts which as an insider I regard as unproblematic and take for granted. The corresponding advantage of being an insider is having a greater store of background knowledge of the institution and professional experience in conducting tutorials to inform the interpretation of findings.

The themes highlighted in Chapter 3 of the contentious nature of thinking in social exchanges and of the availability of different warrantable perspectives on the same topic apply with particular force to the question of researcher stance. Within the last decade some social scientists have questioned not simply the practicality of maintaining a detached position but its value. They have argued instead for the importance of taking an engaged role and of collaborating with informants to bring about understanding and possibly change. Gitlin and colleagues, for example, write of the danger which they perceive in attempting to adopt a detached stance. They describe how novice researchers:

> are cautioned against "going native," that is, being so drawn into the "native's" perspective as to lose all objectivity. Our position on this matter is somewhat different. The danger, for us, is not "going native," but detachment. The question is not whether the data are biased; the question is whose interests are served by the bias.
> (Gitlin, Siegel and Boru, 1989, p.245)

As the discussion in the last section of my attempt to adopt the role of an '*impartial* sympathetic observer' suggests, I did not see myself in this research study as having a particularly engaged role in advocating a particular programme of change, or actively representing the interests of a particular group. Previous sections of this chapter have outlined the attempts that I made not to claim a privileged position of power as a researcher and to work in a collaborative fashion with respondents. I was motivated by the liberal aim of not wishing to take power, or control, away from informants; but I was not guided by the more radical purpose of *empowering* respondents. This value position may well be attacked by some readers of the thesis. However, it seemed to me to be important to avoid the delusions of self-importance and the danger of a paternalistic guiding of respondents towards change that might be associated with a more radical researcher stance.

Transcription of the interviews

The transcription of interviews or life history narratives, which at one time might have been seen as no more than a necessary chore that had to be accomplished to allow the 'real' work of analysis to begin, is now treated by many researchers as an important, and somewhat problematic, research activity (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Guided by the work of Ochs (1979) some writers on research methods also choose to emphasise the fact that transcription decisions are theory driven, and that: "Transcribing discourse, like photographing reality, is an interpretive practice." (Riessman, 1993, p.13). Certainly transcription can be seen to involve a process of construction rather than of simple 'reproduction'.

In this new climate of opinion where transcription is treated as a key research activity rather than a menial task, it seemed essential to give an account of my own transcribing practice.

A simple but important initial point to make is that I carried out the transcription of the interview tapes myself. Close listening and relistening to individual sections of talk, sometimes struggling to produce a satisfactory reading, had the advantage of allowing me to develop familiarity with individual interviews at this early stage of analysis. The work of transcription was guided by a few straightforward objectives. One was to provide as full a record as possible of all of the words that were exchanged during the interviews. 'Tidying up' the language at the stage of transcription – by removing 'fillers' and repetitions, for example – would have led to the loss of important information, including the subtle ways in which individuals might be qualifying their utterances. Tidying up the transcript would also have hidden from view the way in which participants in particularly disjointed passages were struggling to construct an account which adequately represented their position on an issue.

Another simple but important objective in the work of transcription was to produce a text which provided reminders of the way in which the interviews were a product of active collaboration between the informant and interviewer. All back-channel, encouraging, responses by myself or the informant were recorded and noted in a straightforward way, as the following extract illustrates:

> St39 They've probably not recovered from that. (CA:Yeah) Ehm, but I notice that more as a mature student, (CA:Yeah) than anything.

(However, in the presentation of interview extracts in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 these back-channel responses have been largely omitted, as it is recognised that their presence can be somewhat irritating to a reader.)

A crude indication of pace, of 'interactivity', was also given by presenting new turns of talk which happened without any very audible pause immediately under the end of the preceding utterance. This gave a visual representation on the page of the pace and nature of interaction between myself and the informant. All passages of overlapping talk were noted in the transcript. Pauses within or between turns were noted and a qualitative indication of their length provided, rather than an exact timing.

Given that the analysis of the interviews was focusing on their content rather than on questions relating to their discourse form, it seemed appropriate to follow M.A.K. Halliday's advice that: "For very many purposes ... there is nothing wrong with transcribing into ordinary orthography." (Halliday, 1989, p.91). However, I also tried to keep in mind Halliday's injunction that: "The important requirement if one does use straightforward orthography is to punctuate the text intelligently." (ibid.)

It seemed important to preserve some indication of the quality of the interaction in the interview to record all instances of laughter, which was done quite simply by noting them in square brackets, as in the following instance:

CA What, what are the frustrations? [Student laughs]

At points where it seemed necessary or appropriate, some of the prosodic or paralinguistic features of speech were also noted in square brackets in the transcript, e.g., [softly]. At some places in the transcript my own interpretation of the manner in which an utterance was said was recorded, e.g., [some emotion in voice, including surprise].

Having a fairly detailed transcription of the interview tapes was of great benefit to myself as an analyst. However, when one does have a reasonably 'faithful' transcription difficult decisions have then to be made at the stage of presenting extracts to the readers of a study. Paul Atkinson captures the hard choices that have to be made in the representation of talk in the following quotation:

> the more *comprehensible* and readable the reported speech, the less "authentic" it must be. The less the ethnographer intervenes, the more delicately he or she transcribes, the *less* readable becomes the reported speech.
> (Atkinson, 1992, p.23)

Atkinson draws our attention here then to the tension that exists between the *readability* and *fidelity* of an interview text. He goes on in his monograph to draw attention to another problematic aspect of transcription, to the fact that: "we can strongly influence the apparent character of our informants in the eyes of readers by our choice of textual conventions." (Atkinson, 1992, p. 27).

For example, the use of a large number of non-standard spellings may set up a negative image of an informant in the eyes of a reader. Atkinson concludes his discussion of these problematic aspects of transcription with the observation that:

> The reflective ethnographer will need to be sensitive to the ways in which his or her representation of speech establishes the speaking subjects as "Others" in a dialogue of difference, or assimilates them to a complicity of identity with ethnographer and reader.
> (Atkinson, 1992, p.29)

A later section of this chapter, *Taking a draft account back to the tutors,* will show that it was possible for the staff respondents in this study to have control over the form in which extracts from their interviews were presented. It was not possible, on straightforward practical grounds, to consult student informants on this matter. My practice in presenting extracts from the student interviews has been to provide only fairly light editing of the transcript record. It appeared appropriate to preserve at least some of the spontaneity and the provisional searching for meaning which occurs in talk. However, I am aware of the danger that Atkinson alerts us to of presenting informants as "Others"; and trust that providing a fairly 'faithful' presentation of speech will not lead readers to see the student informants as "others" and to typify them in any negative way.

General aspects of the process of analysis

The following paragraphs will give an outline account of the manner in which transcript material was read, coded and interpreted. To give clarity to the presentation, I will look first at the method of reading individual interview transcripts and then turn to the matter of analysis across interviews. However, it would be misleading to suggest that these were neatly separated, discrete tasks in the day-to-day work on the transcripts. As preceding sections of the chapter have noted, I brought to the task of reading the transcripts background knowledge gained from the work of observation. There was also the advantage that came from transcribing the tapes myself of often remembering *how* an individual had said a particular utterance or of being able to go back to the tape to check.

One purpose that was pursued in reading and rereading individual transcripts was to identify any main themes which existed in individuals' accounts of their purposes in, and perspectives on, tutorials. This search for main themes was pursued with some caution, however, with an eye being kept open for any negative evidence which did not support a particular thematization of an individual's comments. As a fox rather than a hedgehog (Berlin, 1979), I was also somewhat suspicious of the rallying cry that Strauss gives to researchers analyzing data: '"What's the main story here?" is a kind of motto' (Strauss, 1987, p.35). It seemed important that sub-plots, nuances in the narrative, should not be completely lost to sight in the search for a clear, main story. Ambivalence and tensions within utterances were treated as an appropriate reaction to a complex social situation and as worth representing rather than as an annoying hindrance to clear presentation.

This concern with identifying individuals' *perceptions and purposes* was balanced by an interest in what each interview transcript might reveal about *tutorials* themselves. In the reading of individual transcripts I attempted to be alert to any comments which seemed to shed a particularly intense light on some feature of tutorials. As Okely has noted: "It may require only one remark, one individual's example to unravel the elusive intelligibility of the group or context." (Okely, 1994, p.25). The passage quoted earlier where an informant and myself talk through the need for a tutor to assist in shaping the problem that a student is experiencing is a good example of the insight that came from the remarks of an individual student.

Interest in identifying central themes in the transcripts of individual students was prompted largely by a wish to examine variation between students in their general perceptions of tutorials. A conventional approach to capturing variation between students in their perceptions and purposes is to create a set of analytical categories that give a summary picture of the range of different positions that a student may adopt towards a particular phenomenon. It has already been observed that early on in the stage of analysis it became apparent that such an attempt "to encapsulate the burden of informants' comments within clear, synoptic, analytical categories would not be appropriate or indeed feasible." However, this does not mean that the question of variations between individual students in their perceptions of

tutorials was then neglected in analysis and presentation as Chapter 6 will reveal.

The matter of representing variation between informants in their views of tutorials did not arise to the same degree for the tutors who were interviewed, as the analysis of the staff transcripts revealed considerable unanimity of stance on key issues concerning tutorials. At first I found it surprising that there was not more variation between the staff informants in their comments on tutorials. On reflection, however, it seemed unproblematic that a group of people who were regarded by colleagues and students as expert practitioners of this form of teaching should share a broadly similar perspective on tutorials and set of teaching values.

The discussion in the past few paragraphs has focused on the question of the *general* variations that could or could not be discerned in the accounts that informants gave of tutorials. The work of analysis also had as a central aim the examination of informants' thoughts concerning the many *specific* topics which were raised during the interviews. There was an interest in noting both similarities and differences in the manner in which individuals talked about specific features of tutorials. To aid this process of comparing across interviews reactions to specific features of tutorials, systems of coding were devised separately for the student and staff interviews. The categories used in the coding of stretches of talk had an organisational purpose, i.e., were created to assist the task of analysis not to generate theory. Many of the categories were identical to the specific topics contained in the interview guides. For example, student comments on their preference for a more focused or more wide-ranging discussion were coded under the category of STRUCTURE. All of the instances from across the interviews of talk coded under the heading of STRUCTURE were then collected together in a computer file. A check was made to ensure that instances had been accurately coded under that particular heading. They could then be analysed in detail.

Single passages of student or staff talk often contained a number of different topic themes, each of which required to be indexed, so an individual passage might have several coding categories attached to it. A small but important feature of the coding system that was adopted for the students was that each

passage of coded talk contained a number which identified the interview that it came from. Coded passages of staff talk were identified by the individual's name. It was thus possible when analysing the whole set of comments gathered from across interviews on a particular topic to refer back to the original context of an utterance to check meaning. There was a wish to avoid the type of coding system which completely decontextualizes comments. Each coded extract for the student respondent also indicated the gender of the student, year of study and the tutorial group where the student had been observed, so that differences on these dimensions could be explored if appropriate.

The preceding paragraphs have given a picture of the general approach that was taken to the analysis of interview material. However, there are a few finer details of the analysis which require some comment and these specific aspects are pursued in the following section.

Specific aspects of the process of analysis

An important guideline that I attempted to keep in mind while reading and re-reading the interview transcripts was the need to be alert to the different purposes that a respondent or myself as interviewer might be pursuing within a single turn of talk. Empirical research and theorising in linguistics and socio-linguistics has established very firmly that individual utterances frequently carry out several functions simultaneously (Labov and Fanshell, 1977; Levinson, 1983). In applying this insight to the practice of analysis I was aware, for example, that particular passages could be read both as accounts of, and an accounting for, particular behaviour in tutorials. As another example of the different purposes that might be pursued in individual utterances, some passages could be seen as both informing me about a particular aspect of the individual's experience and redefining the topic of discussion more in the terms of the informant.

Unlike, say, many discourse analysis studies, the present investigation has focused on reporting the content of informants' statements rather than the particular forms of language which they used to account for their actions. Although attention to general forms and specific features of language does not feature as a substantive part of the presentation of findings; the reading

of the transcripts did attempt to consider the ways in which linguistic forms and content are related, and in particular how the choice, say of specific syntactic features, can convey very fine shades of meaning. In interpreting informants' comments it seemed especially important to note the way in which the modality of statements related to their ostensible content. As Hodge and Kress (1993, p.127) note an analysis of modal indications may be "sensitively diagnostic about a speaker's attitude to the utterance.".

Aspects of the presentation of interview material

The earlier discussion of decisions made at the stage of analysis, (including those involving transcription), have touched on a number of important questions concerning the presentation of interview material. There a few other decisions and issues concerning presentation which require discussion, and they will be examined in the present section.

One aspect of analysis and presentation which needs some comment is the use of counting. Very many qualitative studies have adopted a style of reporting which eschews any quantitative measures. Linguistic qualifiers such as 'some', 'to a certain extent', 'a very high likelihood that', may be brought into service but the use of actual numbers does not appear. This style of reporting has not escaped criticism (e.g., Bryman, 1988) but it remains very prevalent. Like many previous qualitative studies, much of my own presentation of material only makes use of 'linguistic qualifiers'. However, at certain points in the presentation of material some simple counts have been given. At places where it was both possible and important to give the reader a sense of the numerical weighting of a division in opinion this has been done. More generally, attempts have been made to indicate how representative particular comments were of more general opinion.

Another aspect of presentation which merits at least a very brief comment is the 'voice' that I have used at places in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. At places in these chapters I have written in the first person rather than using a more conventional, impersonal style of reporting. Such an action may lay me open to the criticism of employing a 'blurred genre' (Geertz, 1980); but this seemed to be a risk which was worth taking. Rather than hiding behind the

authoritative mask of impersonal reporting, it struck me as important that I 'came clean' about the fact that I personally was the source of certain perceptions and interpretations. This point of style implies an awareness that interpretations other than the ones I am putting forward might be possible and plausible; and a concern that I do not adopt an inappropriately 'authoritative' stance toward the readers of this thesis. More generally I have attempted to avoid a style of presentation which 'lectures' the reader. I feel sympathy with the position advocated by Meloy. In her paper on 'Problems of writing and representation in qualitative inquiry', she stated that: "I wanted to find support for the notion of placing/expecting the authority or power of learning from qualitative research with the reader rather than with me as the teller, i.e., "learn this" , "note this", "beware of that"" (Meloy, 1993, p.319). There are distinct constraints on the extent to which the objective that Meloy sets out in this quotation can be put into practice; but it certainly strikes me as being an attractive ideal. I have tried to follow this ideal to the limited extent of attempting not to hector my readers into any opinions and of not claiming any privileged authority from and in my role as researcher.

There is one more point of presentation which requires some commentary. A few of the extracts from the interviews which are presented are fairly long. This is particularly true of Chapter 7, The Tutors' Perspective. The length of these extracts is not due to any failure of editorial zeal on my part. It is only by presenting more extended pieces of talk that one can begin to illustrate how the informants really did engage in thinking through the topics that were discussed and the finer shades of meaning which emerged as they reflected on, worried away at, an issue. Presenting fairly long extracts also preserves the complexities contained within the accounts that individuals present of some topic. These complexities and the individual's own voice would have been lost to sight if analysis and presentation had been driven by a desire to create synoptic analytic categories and to use these categories as the principal means to present 'findings'.

As the next section of the chapter reveals it was possible to gain views on certain points of presentation from the tutors involved in the study. The following section also provides a general account of the purposes and process of *taking a draft account back to the tutors*.

Taking a draft account back to the tutors

Much to my regret, I realised at the time when I was conducting the interviews with students that I would not be able to return to them for comments on a draft write-up. A process of negotiation was not possible as a result of a number of practical difficulties, including the fact that by the time that the transcription and analysis of interviews was complete many of them would have left not only the university but also Edinburgh itself. Accordingly, although I could give students an assurance at the time of interview that their confidentiality would be respected in any use that I made of their discussion with me, I could not promise any further consultation or actual negotiation of my account of their views.

However, it was possible to take a draft chapter to the tutors for negotiation. Giving the tutors the opportunity to review, and possibly negotiate different meanings for parts of, my account had a dual motivation. I wished to be quite open with my informants about the way in which I had used their comments; and there seemed no good reason why the collaboration to explore their understanding of tutorials should stop with the interviews and not continue into the stages of analysis and presentation. In other words, it seemed important as a point of principle, of ethical research practice, to take my account back to the staff informants, laying it open to scrutiny and potential modification. The tutors were told, at the time of interview, that I would get back to them later with a draft account which could be negotiated.

The second, and quite distinct, motive was to gain a view of the extent to which the interpretations that I had put forward and my selection of main issues for discussion made sense to the tutors. Respondent validation would perhaps be too grand, and philosophically loaded, a term to describe what I was trying to achieve; but certainly I wished to see whether specific 'readings' of quotations from individual tutors and more general interpretations struck them as being plausible.

Moving on to describe the process and outcome of the negotiation of a draft chapter with tutors, it proved possible to meet with eight of the ten tutors interviewed and to talk through with them at some length the individual extracts which I had used from their own transcripts, the chapter in general

including my own rationale for the themes pursued, and the style of presentation. The shortest consultation was about an hour in length. (One of the two tutors whom I did not meet in person to talk through the chapter, declined my offer to meet but repeated his willingness for me to make whatever use I wished of the interview material.)

The changes resulting from the meetings with the tutors were far fewer than anticipated. One tutor took the opportunity to add an important refinement to, and qualification of, her original statement concerning communication skills and tutorials. Another tutor noted that for him opposition to the formal assessment of student performance in tutorials was based on "pragmatic", practical grounds rather than those of moral principle. This observation did not necessitate any actual correction of the existing text, but it has been noted in the revised version.

Four of the tutors did wish to see changes to the *form* , although not at all to the substance, of their quotations. They wished to have their quotations 'tidied up', to have "em's" etc. removed, so that their comments would read more fluently. They indicated that they were willing for me to do this editing work. On the other hand two of the tutors were firmly of the opinion that their quotations should not be 'tidied up' at all – one of them stating that such an exercise would give a "false picture". The remaining two tutors with whom the account was negotiated were happy to leave this matter to my personal decision of what was most appropriate for my own purposes.

The tutors who requested that their comments be edited to produce a more fluent account have had their wish put into effect. Clearly this has led to a certain inconsistency in the style of quotations; but this is an unavoidable consequence of taking the matter of respondent negotiation and control seriously.

It was reassuring that the tutors were content with the choice that I had made of the main themes for the chapter, The Tutors' Perspective. They also expressed agreement with the lines of interpretation pursued in Chapter 7, (developed from their collective comments), that I talked through with them. For example, one tutor endorsed in a very vigorous manner the idea that tutors were attempting to ensure that a particular 'moral order' should

prevail in discussion groups. Discussing the tensions between different purposes that I had identified from their accounts led most of the tutors who were consulted to give further examples of these tensions and to return to reflect on the moral dilemmas that could arise in small group teaching.

In summary, the exercise of negotiating a draft chapter with the staff informants brought much less revision, active reworking by informants, than I had anticipated might occur. From my perspective as researcher, it was encouraging to discover that the informants were satisfied with the way in which I had used their comments and that my interpretations made sense to them, appeared to capture their own conceptions and values.

Summary

This chapter has given an account of the research work that was conducted in this study. My position on issues of validation was described and reasons given for adopting a particular style of analysis and presentation. A narrative was then provided of the different stages of research work which also explained the reasoning behind key research decisions and actions. A particularly important matter, given the history of research into small group teaching, was the definition of my stance as analyst towards my informants and the values which informed this stance.

The narrative that has been presented in this chapter set out to deal with the conventional agenda of "researchers' problems" by describing the aims of the study, the approach taken to analysis, presentation and validation. By giving a fairly full account of the process of interviewing itself, there was an attempt made to give readers an opportunity to judge how the interviews might have been perceived by the informants and the extent to which the informants were enabled to construct and tell their own understandings of aspects of tutorials.

Chapter 5

The Students' Perspective 1: transition to university and changes over time

Introduction

The next chapter will examine how participants reacted to, viewed, particular features of tutorials. This sharply-focused picture of how students described specific matters needs to be balanced, however, by a wider view of changes in experience and perceptions over time and of the transition from school to university. Accordingly this present chapter will consider changes that students in their second and subsequent years of study identified in the nature of tutorial interaction during the course of their undergraduate career. It will also look at how students perceived their early tutorials and the challenges which they faced in this period of transition from the ways of school to those of university.

Transition to university

Relevant school experience?

To start the account of the transition from school to small group teaching at university, informants were asked a very specific question concerning their school experience. They were requested to comment on whether or not there was anything they had done at school which prepared them for discussions at university. (This question was not put to the mature students, and some students did not comment directly on the question.) In all there were forty replies to this question; fourteen said **yes** clearly, four said **yes but** added considerable qualifications to their response, and twenty-two said **no** clearly. There was, therefore, a very distinct opposition of opinion on this matter, with little middle-ground. The participants who said that school had not

provided them with activities that were a useful preparation for discussion in small groups at university were usually very negative in their opinions, as can be seen from the following illustrative quotation:

> St17 Nothing at all. No. Absolutely nothing at school prepared me for talking in groups.

By contrast the following quotation shows a participant who felt that her school experience had provided her with a very useful preparation:

> St13 I did a couple of S levels both of which were taught. One was taught on a one-to-one level. One was taught with a ratio of one teacher three pupils. And that was very useful indeed. Ah, because I found it a much more rigorous way of teaching. Uhm, and only a couple of tutorial groups here have sort of matched the standard there. Uhm, so yeah that did help.

In talking through this question a number of the informants pointed out the practical difficulties that school teachers could face in any attempt to set up and encourage more discussion-based work. For example, a third year student commented on how:

> St36 It's very difficult I think for teachers to go from, say, teaching a class to teaching on a sort of tutorial basis. Apart from anything else the size doesn't work. You can't possibly teach twenty people in a seminar based way. So I felt that it was like a totally different world.

Comparing these last quotations brings into view the marked effect that differences in class size, school resources, may have on a student's acquisition of discussion experience prior to university, aside from differences in teaching practices.

Turning from specific matters to comment on the overall pattern of responses to this question of school preparation for tutorials, some caution is required over the use of this set of findings. The sample of students is not large, and it would be interesting to see this question pursued in a larger-scale quantitative study. The current findings are perceptions of school provision, and not an 'objective measurement' of what schools are doing. However, even on a conservative interpretation of these responses, it is clear that it cannot be assumed that all students will nowadays arrive at university well prepared by schools with the skills required for small group discussion and

presentation to small groups. It is also evident that there is considerable inequality in the preparation that students have received.

Family and peers as a source of information

Some of the interviews also provided evidence of inequalities in the extent to which students coming up to university had gained knowledge from family and peers about the nature of tutorials. The following pair of interview extracts illustrate clearly the inequalities in knowledge that might be associated with family background and peer contact. In the first extract a second year Sociology student describes how she had gained a preview of what tutorials were like from people close to her.

> CA ... when you came to University, did you have much of a clue as to what tutorials were about, or not?
> St 12 I think I did because, like, my big sister, she went to Uni two years before I did and my boyfriend is in his fourth year now, so I sort of worked out from what they told me.

In contrast, a second year Social History and Politics student described how her family and friends were not in a position to provide her with any information about tutorials.

> St27 Well, I came to university and I was the first person in my family to come to university. And nobody, I didn't have any experience from other people. All my friends – I didn't have any older friends – most of my friends were of my age or younger; and I came to university and I hadn't a **clue** what was going to go on. OK, I'd read the prospectus, I'd read everything, but I still - that doesn't mean anything - still don't know. So I thought what the hell is a tutorial?

This particular student revealed that her lack of knowledge concerning tutorials at her entry to university had not hindered her later enjoyment of, and participation in, discussion. Other students who commented on how their social background had not provided them with any knowledge about, or preparation for, tutorials, also did not identify their background as being a source of significant longer-term disadvantage. It would appear from the present study then that there are distinct initial differences between entrant undergraduates in the extent to which family and peers had provided

information about tutorials; but that the effects of these differences may be quite modest and should not be exaggerated.

Differences in ethos and expectations between school and university

In pursuing the question of school preparation for university tutorials, or in talking through related matters, a number of informants commented on the differences in ethos and expectations that might exist between schools and university, and the problems in adjusting to university tutorials that could arise from these differences. For example, the student who was quoted earlier declaring that school had not provided him with any preparation for talking in groups at university, went on to observe that:

> St17 I think it's all very individualistic at the school still. I mean, you're meant to be working on your own.

Two informants drew attention to the obstacles that the individualistic ethos prevalent in certain schools might place in the way of a transition to a co-operative form of group work. A third year student who was an enthusiastic participant in tutorials and herself very willing to share ideas stated that:

> St36 I mean the way that we are taught at schools is such an individualistic way that I think it is really difficult to overcome that: and we were taught, sort of, when you write, you know, you write like that [gesture of covering up work] and then to go into a tutorial when you're actually sharing your ideas, I mean people are very, very selfish. I mean, I know people that say well no, because there is a limit to how many views you can give ..... I mean people do still think like that.

In a similar vein, a mature third year student contrasted his own experience of work groups, where co-operative interaction was a requirement of everyday life, with the individualistic assumptions which governed the behaviour of students who had come straight from school to university:

> St39 There's the cultural aspect there. On your own, you don't cooperate at the school: and that's a barrier to cooperating.... . Whereas if you've worked before, you do cooperate, just with the nature of work processes involved I think, so you're used to it. You don't feel so threatened just to ask somebody ...

These two quotations suggest that some students may need to make a considerable adjustment to their values and perspective on life if they are to act in accordance with the norms of co-operation which prevail in university discussion groups. Students entering university may need to acquire not only appropriate discussion skills, but also a different view of how they *ought* to act in groups. As an aside, it is worth noting that the 'hidden curriculum' of many departments and faculties in higher education may reinforce, rather than diminish, the individualistic approach to studying which students bring with them from school. Students in higher education are sometimes given a mixed message on the value of discussion groups. They are encouraged to cooperate in such groups but at the same time the system of assessment may reward only individual efforts.

Only a very few students commented directly on the effects of general school ethos, but their comments, (as the past few paragraphs have indicated), were of great value in prompting reflection on the influence that the norms instilled by the education system may have on students' actions in discussion groups. However, the difference between school and university in specific expectations concerning learning and discussion was a somewhat more common theme. As an example of this theme, the following exchange between a third year male Accountancy student and myself brings out very clearly that he saw discussion at school and discussion at university as being quite different activities actuated by qualitatively distinct expectations.

> CA So what you're saying is some experience of discussion but a very different set of expectations for discussion, is that the -?
> St22 Yeah. That's right. You do, do discuss things but, as you say, it's aimed at different principles. It might be discuss, like eh, how to do this equation and then that's it, sort of thing, you don't discuss it, why you use it, why it would be better to use something else, what implications it's got for other things: and that's more of your university kind of thing, in different stages of applying it, I would think. Whereas you don't get that at school.

A number of the informants expressed the view that the transition from school to university required them to take on a more active and independent learning role. One student, for example, talked of how "at school you get parrot fed everything" (St47); and two used the verb "spoon feed" to characterise learning at school. Here is one of these two students talking

about the change in expectations and style of teaching that she had experienced on coming to university:

> St43 'Cause at school everything was spoon fed to you. Maybe towards - I did Sixth Year Studies in Biology, where you do your own project, and then you can work off your own bat, but before then it was like, here's your homework, have it in by tomorrow, and you've got to do like these ten questions. So to go from that to be told right we're going to discuss this next week.
> CA It's, it's quite a leap.
> St43 Exactly. Yeah.

This quotation highlights the fact that for some students learning to cope with academic tasks, such as discussion in small groups, may require a distinct change in how they view their own role as a learner. They need to absorb and act by a new set of cultural expectations which demand that they show more initiative and take on more responsibility for their own learning.

At the same time there may need to be a corresponding change in the way that they think about the role of the teacher. A number of the students made statements which point up the task that may be faced in discarding expectations that teachers will act in a directive and authoritative manner. One first year student, for example, remarked to me that he felt that most of the people in his tutorial groups were "still apprehensive". When I encouraged him to expand on this matter by asking, "Apprehensive in what ways?" he made the following statement:

> St31 ... It's sort of ah, taking, eh, the teacher out of its teaching role and having him as a, or her, as somebody who promotes discussion. I don't think people are prepared for that.

The preceding section of this chapter on *Relevant school experience?* described how a large proportion of the sample of informants believed that school had not prepared them for taking part in discussion groups at university. For many students tutorials may represent a quite novel social situation which they need to read and master. It is possible that the general uncertainties and anxieties evoked by a new situation may make immediate change in the "authority-dependency relationship" unlikely. On this theme, one third year Nursing Studies student contrasted the "higher up" years with first year, in the following terms:

St1 You are more willing to, in the tutorial, start debating yourselves and things like that. Whereas in first year you expect someone else to lead, I think. 'Cause it's this totally new idea. You've never done anything like it at school.

Student recollections of tutorials at the beginning of their academic career

When they were asked to reflect back on the experience of their first few tutorials, many students agreed with the informant cited in the last quotation that tutorials were a "totally new idea" and that they were initially uncertain about what to expect. In the words of one third year Nursing Studies student:

St3 "Certainly I think that most of the group felt that as well, you know, no one really knew what a tutorial was about, what was expected of them."

Chapter 2 noted that a "number of studies suggest that uncertainty about their role and anxiety about participation may be particularly acute in the early stages of students' experience of small group learning". A similar picture emerges from the present study. The following paragraphs will illustrate how some informants recalled the anxieties associated with coping with a new social situation and how 'face concerns' were particularly salient at this stage of the students' career. It should be noted, however, that not all of the informants who reported uncertainty about their role in initial tutorials described these tutorials as anxious experiences. Anxiety was a common, but not a necessary, concomitant of uncertainty. Here, for example, is a first year psychology student looking back a term later on his first few tutorials:

St49 Well I just didn't know what to expect. Just, eh. Just – they were OK.

His description fits very well with the picture that I gained from my observations of his tutorial performance, where he seemed to be a bit uncertain as to how to proceed but quite relaxed.

In contrast to this Psychology student, a number of students frankly admitted that they felt considerable anxiety in tutorials early in their career. For example, a now confident fourth year Nursing Studies student talked of how: "I think I found them quite nerve-wracking actually". (St7). For one

participant, who at the time of interview was in her fourth year studying Psychology, this anxiety about first year tutorials took a particularly acute form. She gave a candid account of how:

> St45 In first year I was terrified. In fact, I had a lot of problems with my tutorial because I – I actually missed about five in a row and got a letter from my Director of Studies, and all this because – I'd wake in the morning. I was so frightened to go in because I didn't feel I knew enough. And so I just wouldn't go in, rather than face going in and not knowing anything, you know.

Another student described both great initial anxiety and the way in which these feelings eased somewhat over time:

> St41 I think Politics was the first one. I can remember being absolutely terrified, because I had been, ehm. [slight pause] I think you do, you just don't know any of the people there. But, ehm, as I say, the second brought me through but it, it helps you, get a bit easier as you get more confident.

The lessening of anxiety, of "pressure", as you gradually became acquainted with other students in your group and felt less socially isolated was described by a man in his second year studying Social History:

> St26 Well I think they were a bit intimidating at first. Sort of, you felt under an awful lot of pressure on your own at your tutorial – sort of worrying at first, but I think once you know people in your tutorial you seem sort of more comfortable.

"Knowing" people, was also a central feature of the account that a third year Accountancy student gave of the feelings that he experienced within his early tutorials:

> St 19 ... it depended on the people you knew as well. If you just knew one person that was fine. If you went in knowing nobody, it was a bit off putting.

This theme of the importance for personal comfort in tutorials of knowing people will be pursued later in the chapter.

Looking back at early tutorials, even from the distance of third and fourth year, a number of participants remembered this as a time when face concerns had a very strong effect on participation. A third year student, who was a

ready participant in debate, when asked whether she had perceived "differences from the tutorials you had in first year to now?" highlighted this matter and talked about it in a way which distanced her from these early concerns:

> St37 They [first years], they think in universities are very academic and they're quite shy about saying anything that might be considered stupid.

The need to be guarded, particularly in a social situation where you have no acquaintance with the other participants, also features clearly in the following recollections by a third year Nursing Studies student of her first year tutorials:

> St1 In some ways [first year tutorials] they're worse because you don't know anybody in them. And you're scared to open your mouth in case you look stupid. [slight laugh] And I think everybody tends to sit in silence.

A common theme in the recollections that students gave of their early tutorials was the importance that they attributed to the tutor's social manner and teaching style. Tutors were portrayed as either allaying or increasing anxiety, depending on their personal style. A number of students also gave fairly vivid accounts of specific 'bad experiences' that they received at the hands of tutors, and described how these bad experiences inhibited their participation in later tutorials run by the same tutor. For example, a third year Social and Economic History student talked of the inhibiting effect of being "hammered" by one tutor, but contrasted his action with the generally "helpful" style of another tutor:

> St38 [Subject X] I remember that because, hem, I said something – I can't remember what it was – and I got hammered for it by the actual tutor, and I got really scared after that for saying anything else; so I remember that one more, really.
> CA Did that put you off for a while?
> St38 Yeah, it did. I didn't want to say anything should he'd bite my head off again. [Subject Y] I'd the same tutor and she was really, really nice – I mean helpful. That was good, that helped.
> CA So a big, big difference.
> St38 Yeah.

Clear communication of tutors' expectations?

One way in which some of the uncertainty surrounding early tutorials can be removed is by tutors giving clear guidelines for preparation and discussion – a statement of how students are expected to act in tutorials. When questioned on this matter, student opinion was divided. A bare majority of students felt that tutors had given a clear sense of their expectations. In the words of one first year student who was satisfied with this aspect of tutor performance:

> St34 ... yeah, they did actually, especially the first tutorials they went through the format they would take, and things we'd be discussing in later ones, really, so we did have some idea of what they were about.

Many students, however, felt that they definitely had not received a clear introduction to the nature and purposes of tutorials, as the following words from a second year Sociology student reveal:

> St9 I mean you spend the first term and a half working out what's expected in tutorials before you even get going. It takes you ages because you don't know what a tutorial is: and there's no guidance really given for what a tutorial is. You just get these topics.

A few students also commented on how practice had varied from tutorial to tutorial. One first year informant, who felt that there had not been sufficient explanation given of the nature of tutorials, believed that students as well as tutors might on occasion share some responsibility for this state of affairs. He noted that:

> St31 Ah, I think they all made the same mistake. Ehm, in the way that they said "Have tutorials been explained to you?", and everybody really timidly nods. It's **our fault**.

From my background knowledge of the Social Sciences Faculty at Edinburgh, it seems likely that the division of opinion among the participants on this matter of the explanation of the nature and purposes of tutorials points to a real difference in practice between tutors, rather than simply a difference in perception.

It is desirable not only that staff communicate clearly concerning the nature and purposes of tutorials, but also that they give entrant undergraduates a firm sense of the role that a tutor might play as mentor to an individual's studies. The following quotation, from a fourth year student reflecting back on her difficulties in first year, highlights the fact that the tutor's availability and role as mentor may sometimes be conveyed to the student indirectly:

> St45 .. I mean, I think the trouble with a lot of things is that it's all implicit; and it's not that they don't mean you to come and speak to them: but they don't actually sort of say, "Look, I really am more than willing to help you."

From my own observations of tutorials, it does seem that tutors may on occasion fail to give a sufficiently explicit and detailed account of the role that they may play as a study adviser to students outwith the tutorials themselves. Practice concerning this matter is variable; and the above statement does appear to be a fair depiction of the actions of certain tutors.

Social benefits of tutorials

The account that has been presented up to this point of students' recollections of their early tutorials has brought out the social anxieties that students may experience when faced with a new situation – a situation which they may see as potentially threatening to their display of intellectual competence. There is a need to balance this view of early tutorials as a source of potential anxiety and threat with a description of how many students saw first year tutorials as providing an opportunity for forging social contacts and friendships. Some students mentioned that it was quite a contrast moving from a school where they were well known to staff to an institution where they did not have the same sense of the existence of an integrated community. These students went on to describe the value of contact with a member of staff leading a tutorial, and with peers in the group. The following words from a Sociology student in her third year illustrate very clearly this theme of the potential value of tutorials in coping with a more impersonal institution:

St14 I think that's what I found was the worst thing when I got here in first year, because I really enjoyed school and, you know, the small classes. You know, I was at a great school, ... I knew everybody and I really enjoyed education, so I immediately thought I would enjoy it. But then you get here and things just – at least there was no sort of community or integration, so, and the only way that that will ever happen is through tutorials, smaller group – because all of my courses have had about two hundred odd people in them.

The contrast between the impersonality of large lectures and the closer sense of connection that can be established within a tutorial group also emerges strongly in this extract from the interview of a third year, male Accountancy student:

St19 I mean – especially the subjects that I did in first year. I mean there were like two hundred, or one hundred, in each lecture hall and it's never very intimate. But when you go into the tutorial, it's much more of that, much more intimate. And as you progress through, in third year I mean, you [know] most people who [are] in your course now, so that helps.

There has been a large increase in student numbers in UK universities in recent years and a corresponding decrease in the amount of contact time that staff can give to individual students. This situation brings with it the clear danger that some individuals will feel isolated, or even alienated, from the general life of the university. The findings of the present student interview study suggest that tutorial groups may play, at least, a modest part in assisting some students to become more socially integrated within a totally new institutional environment.

The findings also suggest that tutorials may provide a useful function in enabling a significant number of entrant undergraduates to meet new people and to form friendships. During the interview informants were asked whether or not they had found tutorials of any social benefit in terms of meeting new people. Opinion on this matter was almost equally divided between those who did not identify their initial tutorials as having any particularly strong social benefits and those who did. The following two quotations exemplify the views of those students who stated that first year tutorials had been a place where they could meet new people and form friendships. The first quotation is from a second year male Social History

student and the second from a woman who is a second year Sociology student:

> St26 in lectures, well first year there's about a hundred people in lectures and you don't meet any people but tutorials I think do help in that respect. Especially in first year when no one knows anyone. .... Yeah. I mean most of my friends now were in tutorials last year.

> St15 in first year it helps a lot: because if you're not in halls and then you don't really know people on your course, these tutorials, you can make friends in your tutorials which helps you, doesn't make you feel so lonely... .

Perceptions of changes over time

Turning from a close focus on students' reports of their early tutorials, this second part of the chapter gives a broader view of the changes in experience of tutorials over time identified by students in their second and subsequent years. Analysis of student statements on this topic of perceived changes over time brought out a number of main themes:

- *greater demands,*
- *increase in confidence,*
- *changes in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction,*
- *the benefits of experience and understanding of expectations,*
- and, *subject knowledge and the quality of discussion.*

All of these main themes will be explored and illustrated within this part of the chapter. Chapter 7, The Tutors' Perspective, will reveal that there are very close parallels between the accounts that students gave of changes that they had perceived in tutorials over the course of their undergraduate career and the ways in which tutors described the differences between leading groups of first year, as opposed to third or fourth year, students.

Greater demands

Looking first at the theme of *greater demands*, there were two separate strands in participants' comments on this matter. One strand of comment focused principally on the greater intellectual demands placed upon students within

tutorials as the years progressed. Tutors' higher expectations concerning preparation and the quality of discussion were also mentioned. To illustrate the manner in which students talked about these changes in the demands placed on them, here is a woman in her third year, studying Economic and Social History:

> St38 Ehm, first year I was given more help on the sort of things I'd to find out about. Third year, the actual questions that you're, you're set, the actual topics are a lot more complex, I think.

A second year Sociology student drew attention to how tutors had higher expectations concerning the performance of students who now had a year's experience:

> St12 In second year they expect you to know what tutorials are a bit more; and they sort of expect you to do the reading, and they expect you to be able to discuss it more.

The other strand of comment, which was particularly evident in interviews with a number of second year students, focused on the tutor's role as a mentor, source of study advice and support. Some informants noted a decline between first and second years in the quantity of study advice and support that was available from tutors and an increase in the demand for somewhat more personal independence and initiative.

One second year student, for example, described how in first year they "spoon-fed us more" and believed that there had been quite a decline in the support that was offered and a "jump" between first and second year in the expectations made on students for independence. On the question of study skills advice the Sociology student, whose words were quoted earlier, noted that it was still available but had to be sought out more actively by the students themselves, rather than being volunteered by the tutors.

> St12 I mean, in first year they did a lot more. In second year, they expect you to ask, you know, they're not sort of giving you the information, they expect you to go off and do as much, kind of wheel back and ask them. But, yeah, they tend to be helpful with the essays and stuff, if you ask them about it.

Increase in confidence

While students' reflections on the differences between the years pointed to an increase in intellectual demands, they also saw tutorials in the later years of their undergraduate career as a much less demanding *social* experience. They talked of a decline in wariness and a considerable increase in confidence in speaking as the years passed. For example, a mature, third year student believed that this increase in confidence was a key difference between first and third year:

> St39 Probably the students' confidence in – in dealing with it. Ehm it's probably the biggest thing is for them to gain a confidence as they, as they go along.

The second year Social History student quoted below, was one of a number of informants who believed that this gain in confidence in speaking was a valuable change, a part of their personal development:

> St27 It's, it's, certainly brought me out of my shell a bit.

This recognition of at least a certain gain of confidence was a common motif in the accounts that informants gave of changes over time – with only a few exceptions, such as a second year Sociology student who gave an account of her continuing, severe anxiety concerning participating in tutorials.

Changes in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction

This increase in confidence over time was sometimes 'explained' by the informants, partly in terms of: "the fact that in fourth year everybody sort of knows each other and everything's a lot more relaxed." St.45.

A considerable proportion of the informants noted how, as the years progressed, they got to know the other members of their course quite well and that this acquaintance led to a different quality of social atmosphere and of interaction within the group. A contrast was sometimes drawn between third and fourth year tutorials where the members knew each other quite well and in consequence felt quite relaxed, as opposed to first year where they sat with "strange people" around them and felt more tense. In addition to individuals feeling more at ease in a group where they knew other

members, some of the participants attempted to articulate the existence of a different character of interaction in third and fourth year groups. A woman in her third year studying Economic and Social History talked of how:

> St40 But then I think ehm by the time you get to third year, you tend to know everybody a lot better. It is more socialised that aspect, I would say.

While a third year male Accountancy student observed that:

> St22 But once you get to know the people and you're meeting them socially and that, you're not talking down with your pals and that.

A few informants also commented on how as they had gained subject knowledge and experience over the years, the quality of the interaction with the tutor him or herself had changed. Here, for example, is a third year male Accountancy student describing his perception of this particular change.

> St20 It's just they expect us to know more really, that's all. They don't look down at you as much, sort of thing, where you can more talk at the tutor's level, sort of thing.
> CA So you feel it's a bit more equal then?
> St20 Yeah. I don't know whether that's me feeling it [St20 slight laugh] but I get that impression anyway. Yeah.

There is a clear perception in this quotation then of a decline in the intellectual, and associated social, distance between students and staff. Findings presented in Chapter 7, The Tutors' Perspective, will show that tutors shared this perception of a decline in the intellectual and social distance between themselves and students over the course of the four years of the undergraduate degree. Chapter 7 will also show that tutors, as well as students, believed that there was a difference in the nature and quality of social interaction between first year as opposed to third or fourth year tutorials.

The benefits of experience and understanding of expectations

In addition to identifying qualitative changes in the social atmosphere within groups, some informants clearly stated that their perception of the *value* of tutorials as a learning experience had changed markedly over time. They described how experience and achieving an understanding of the

expectations which govern debate had changed their view of the nature and worth of tutorials. Here, for example, is a third year Accountancy student describing how experience had changed his perception of tutorials:

> St22 Eh, so certainly your, eh, your idea of them changes as you get older. I think you've more experience of them, you learn, you know, sort of what they know in tutorials, what to take down, what, what he's asking from you – discussion 'n things like that. So I think experience does change your attitudes.

On this theme a third year Nursing student talked of how:

> St4 I find you get more out of them now. Ehm. I don't know if that is just because they are better or because I've more experience of them. Definitely more worthwhile I would say.

Another third year student noted how first year students might not be able to appreciate the contribution that tutorials could make to learning until they had gained more experience.

> St36 I think first year ..... . It is maybe not appreciated how important tutorials are, what you can get from tutorials in first year, and so if you're ticked then you're sort of forced to go to them and maybe then as second year comes along you'll realise the importance of it.

Subject knowledge and the quality of discussion

The accounts given by some participants highlighted another important qualitative change between first and third/fourth year tutorials. A number of third and fourth year students commented on how the quality of discussion had changed as they progressed through the years and gained more knowledge in a particular discipline. For example, a fourth year Psychology student gave a very clear account of the effects of differing levels of subject knowledge on the nature of tutorial discussion. He talked in the following terms of the problems which can arise when first year students are not given sufficiently focused advice on preparing for a tutorial and do not have background knowledge of the subject on which they can draw:

St 47 I dislike tutorials where we haven't been – I mean it happened a lot in first year, we weren't told right prepare something – and I suppose in any given area, particularly in first year if you're not given any kind of instructions to go and do some reading beforehand, then people have much the same view, you know like the sort of layman's view of the subject, and there's no discussion at all.

He then went on to draw a contrast between first and later years of study:

St47 .... it's more difficult in the lower years – I mean a lot of the stuff in the higher years, the discussion arises from people's own views anyway that they've acquired through the years. There's a lot more general knowledge obviously in the subjects that you've picked up.

The following extract from a fourth year Nursing Studies student highlights the fact that a larger stock of subject knowledge may enable one not only to contribute more to the discussion but also to take more from it.

St6 I think when you do get to fourth year, ... , you're going to have a lot more knowledge than say when you were in first year and so you're much better at discussing things which means that – and you probably take much more out of a discussion because you remember what people say. So I think actually in fourth year it should be less emphasis on, you know, these are the facts and this is what I read and these were facts that came out of it and more how you would feel about it and **issues** rather than actual facts.

As is clear, the quotation also brings into focus the way in which an increase in knowledge and experience allows a move away from a more descriptive type of discussion to a more sophisticated approach to analysing topics.

The preceding paragraphs have drawn attention to the effects on the quality of discussion of an increase in knowledge of the content of individual academic subjects – an increase in what might be described as *declarative* knowledge. Some student comments bring into sight the importance that gains in *procedural* knowledge and practice – knowledge of how to go about academic tasks in an appropriate manner – may also have in transforming the nature of discussion. A few of the informants talked of how as they progressed through their academic career they had gained the skills and the practice of taking a more analytical approach to the material that they were discussing. The contrast between a more surface, reproductive approach in first year with a more analytical practice in later years features strongly in the following exchange between a third year mature student and myself.

St39 but eh - the third year tutorials are definitely the most in-depth and intense discussion that takes place than had been in first year where you sit and read something you read in a book. You're analysing it more and before you can learn it, there you're applying it when you come in.
CA So you're saying there is quite a different quality to -
St39 Yeah, there is.
CA the
student contribution?
St39 Yeah. Really.

Overview of perceptions of change over time

The findings presented in the preceding sections have shown that there were very distinct changes over time in all of the five dimensions of: *greater demands, increase in confidence, changes in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction, the benefits of experience and understanding of expectations,* and *subject knowledge and the quality of discussion.* Participants reported an increase in *both* the quality of the social experience of tutorial groups and of their engagement in discussion with the content of their academic disciplines. This current interview study then seems to indicate that a definite developmental progression can be seen in students' perceptions of tutorials and in their reports of their actions within tutorials. Chapter 8 will compare the comments of students on changes over time which have been examined in this present chapter with staff views on the differences that they observe in running small group discussion for different year groups. It will also consider matters concerning good tutoring practice which arise from these changes over time.

Chapter 6

The Students' Perspective 2: accounts of particular aspects of tutorials

Introduction

This chapter sets out to examine closely the participants' talk concerning particular features of tutorials. The strategy adopted in the present chapter for the presentation and examination of material from the student interviews is first to give a very summary account of the features which were identified as important for active discussion and listening by most of the participants. This overview sets a context for the following sections of the chapter. The overview also serves the purpose of succinctly pointing up commonalities between the findings of the present study and previous research.

The following three main sections provide a detailed examination of the participants' talk on:

- the tutor's role and authority and student preferences for how debate is structured,
- perceptions of fellow students' actions in tutorials and actively debating a point with another student,
- tutorials in context.

This triparite division provided a useful framing device for organising the presentation of a large body of 'findings', and one which allowed me to follow the contours of the participants' own talk concerning tutorials. One aim that has been pursued in these three sections is to present sufficient interview material for the reader to be able to gain a clear sense of how statements concerning the participants' perceptions and interpretations have been derived from the interview texts.

It is acknowledged that this style of reporting favours detailed shading at the expense of a clearly etched, concise, analytical account and may be seen by some as unduly descriptive. However, on balance the benefits of pursuing the present reporting strategy appeared to outweigh any potential disadvantages. It seemed important for the validity of the present study to allow at least some of the connections between the interview talk itself and my reading of this talk to be on view, and the process of establishing these connections to be fairly transparent.

It also appeared to be important not to address the reader as though from the standpoint of an authoritative author presenting a clear-cut summary and interpretation of 'findings', but in a slightly more tentative way which would accord greater respect to his or her own interpretative powers. The theoretical perspectives framing the current thesis have been considered in Chapter 3 and my own interpretations of the content that is presented in this chapter and in chapters 5 and 7, are presented in the final discussion chapter of the thesis. However, there was no wish to confine a reader's view of the material narrowly within the purview of my own interpretations. The reporting strategy adopted in this and other chapters was designed in part to allow readers to bring different perspectives to, and to develop their own interpretations of, the interview material gathered in the course of the study.

PART I

Overview

Turning first then to provide an overview of how the participants regarded tutorials, Table 6.1 beneath lists, in no particular rank order, what the participants saw as a cluster of key features in promoting active participation and listening within a tutorial.

Table 6.1: Features identified by participants as important for promoting active participation and listening

- informal group atmosphere
- skills of the tutor in facilitating debate in an engaged manner
- students themselves investing effort in discussion and the creation of a good group atmosphere
- not too large a tutorial group
- self-esteem, confidence
- the nature of the subject matter being discussed
- personal interest in the specific subject matter being discussed
- personal knowledge of the topic under debate and general background of knowledge of the discipline
- appropriate preparation
- not too much pressure from other coursework
- clear focus for preparation provided by the tutor

The features listed in the top half of the preceding table which are concerned with tutor actions, tutorial style and group dynamics have also been clearly identified as important in the earlier research on tutorials that was reviewed in Chapter 2. As in previous studies, participants identified the existence of an *informal group atmosphere* as a key determinant of the quantity of participation and the quality of discussion and listening. Participants not only appreciated the more comfortable, relaxed social atmosphere that

prevailed in groups with an informal character but also had a strong belief that informal groups functioned more effectively. The connection that participants established in their talk between informality and effective group functioning is illustrated in the following extract from the interview of a fourth year Psychology student:

> St43 I think people definitely respond better when they're informal. And the ones I've had in fourth year have been the most informal I've had and they definitely worked a lot better.

An informal group atmosphere was perceived as associated with a decline in face concerns and a consequent increase in willingness to participate. For example, a second year Sociology student talked of how:

> St15 I prefer them to be informal. You know, a lot more relaxed and things. You feel you can say, say things more easily when you are relaxed rather than you're right nervous...

Informality was also viewed as creating a secure climate within which it was easier to raise difficulties and to explore problems in understanding. On this theme, a third year Accountancy student talked of how:

> St21 I find that tutorials are at their best when there is a very, very informal nature about the class. ..... Because if you can feel as if you can open up, right, ask questions without either fears of being stupid.

This topic of the perceived importance of an informal group atmosphere will be addressed in somewhat greater depth in the part of the chapter which examines participants' preference for tutors who related to them in a 'personal' manner and their expectations that members of staff should observe the forms of democratic discourse.

There was a general expectation among the participants in this study that tutors would *energetically apply the skills appropriate for facilitating debate.* One of the facilitating skills that was particularly commented on by participants was the tutor's expertise in ensuring that all members of the group were involved to some extent in the discussion. There was also a strong expectation that tutors would act to moderate students' contributions to ensure that the floor was not monopolised by a few "dominant" students.

A small number of participants did have a strong wish to see a very student-centred form of tutorial, where student talk and direction of the flow of discussion predominated. However, even this group of participants acknowledged that, notwithstanding this student centred ideal, in practice it might often be necessary for the tutor to take quite an active part in proceedings. The following quotation from a third year male Accountancy student highlights the gap that may exist between the ideal of a very student-centred tutorial and everyday practice and suggests why tutors may often not be free to adopt a more 'hands-off' style of facilitation.

> St19 I think it is necessary for them to ask questions if the group 's silent but if – if possible. I think the best tutorial is where the interactions are between the students actually and that helps.
> CA Do you find that happens much?
> St19 Ehm. Not really. No. No, I think that's why there is the definite need for the tutor to chip in there, now and again.

In addition to facilitating debate tutors were expected to *tutor,* in the older sense of the term meaning to teach. Participants expressed their appreciation of tutors who engaged during the tutorial hour in one-to-one teaching interactions with individual students to enable them and the group as a whole to gain new knowledge and perspectives and to refine or to construct new understandings of particular topics.

The *manner* in which tutors applied the skills of facilitating debate was seen as an important determinant of the success or failure of a tutorial. A number of the participants in the study drew a sharp contrast between tutors whom they regarded as unsatisfactory who were merely routinely going through the motions of their job, as opposed to those who displayed real interest, enthusiasm and engagement with their students. This contrast appears, for example, in the following quotation from a third year Accountancy student:

> St22 Eh, and obviously like he shows an interest in his subject as well, whereas, eh, in the past we've sat down to tutorials and the guy 's just holding his book sort of thing and it's started talking. There's no sort of introduction or – it's just like, I've got to get this over – just head down and you're aways.

Many students did not draw the contrast between what they viewed as satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance in quite as sharp and as explicit

a manner as in the preceding quotation. However, analysis of the whole set of student interviews reveals a clear standard of judgement. In both the accounts that students gave of how they believed tutors ought to act and of their disappointments with the behaviour of particular tutors, a general expectation could be discerned on the part of the participants that tutors would perform their role in an *authentic, engaged* manner. Tutors were expected to engage with students in a wholehearted, enthusiastic fashion. Later sections of the chapter will examine in detail other expectations that the participants had concerning how tutors should act and use their authority.

Although the informants' talk revealed that they saw the tutor's actions as the key determinant of the success or failure of a tutorial, they also viewed themselves as bearing some responsibility for the quality of the discussion that was achieved. There was a recognition of the importance of *students themselves investing effort in discussion and the creation of a good group atmosphere.* The part of this chapter entitled 'Perceptions of fellow students' actions in tutorials' will examine what participants viewed as appropriate and inappropriate effort and actions on the part of their peers.

The size of the tutorial was viewed as of considerable importance for the quality of the group experience and in determining willingness to take part in proceedings. There was a strong consensus of opinion that tutorials ran much better when there was *not too large a group*. A number of interlinking advantages were seen to be associated with a small or medium-sized group. One perceived advantage was that a small or medium-sized group was much more likely to have an informal atmosphere which allowed students to feel "more comfortable". Another key advantage identified with smaller groups was the fact that students got to know other members, which in turn contributed to a more informal atmosphere and also allowed individuals to respond in a more appropriate manner to each other's contributions. Group dynamics, "you'd work better as a group actually" (St32), were seen as more satisfactory in smaller rather than larger groups. Distinct intellectual benefits were also seen as flowing from a smaller group size, as in the following comment from a second year Sociology student: "I prefer the smaller groups and you've got more understanding, ehm, you can clarify things"(St15).

It was recognised that it was easier to avoid taking part in a larger group and this raised the anxiety among some informants that those who did not participate in a large group might not receive the attention and advice which they might require. In the words of one Accountancy student: "you're starting to let people slip through the net. You know, they'll sit quietly in the corner, avoid all the questions."(St21).

In summary, group functioning, participation, listening, and intellectual benefits were seen to be advanced by a smaller group size. The feeling of more active membership and belonging that was associated with smaller and medium sized groups is captured well in the words of a third year, male Accountancy student who talked of how:

> St23 [you] feel yourself just, you know, almost in a lecture scenario again where you're just one of a larger group whereas if you've five, six, seven, you know, you're more fundamental, you're needed, you have to keep on the ball, keep yourself going, yeah.

In their talk during interviews a large number of informants explained active participation, or lack of engagement, by themselves or others partly in terms of within-individual factors such as *self-esteem* and *confidence.* A lack of confidence was not, however, thought about as being immutable. As Chapter 5 has noted, students in their senior years described a considerable increase in confidence in taking part within tutorials as their undergraduate career had progressed. In the words of one Nursing Studies student reflecting on the differences over time as she had moved from first to fourth year:

> St6 Maybe not so much [difference] in, in the actual tutorial as in the format of it or anything but certainly – I think everybody makes more contribution in this, actually takes more part in it, ehm, than they did in first year; and I mean a lot of that is to do with confidence, I think ...

The remaining features listed in Table 6.1 are related in some way or other to the content of discussion and they emerged very clearly as matters which informants perceived to be important in facilitating both engagement in the discussion and reflective listening. These features have attracted much less attention in previous studies. As Chapter 2 has described, previous work in this area has concentrated on aspects of tutor style, group dynamics or the

attributes of individual participants. Turning to look at these content-related matters, quite a number of participants drew attention to *the nature of the subject matter being discussed.* These participants pointed out that they saw some subject areas as much more amenable to active debate than others. Some informants drew contrasts between disciplines, while others noted that even within a particular discipline some subjects were more likely to spark lively discussion than others. For example, a third year Accountancy student explained how:

> St19 ... see in Accountancy it's very difficult, because you've got your, your set topics and it's – it's very – it would be very difficult in Accountancy to present a case or an argument or something like that in comparison to other subjects anyway. So – it would depend on the subject as well. I think Economics probably has a better potential.

Another informant, (a first year student studying Social History, Sociology and English Literature), presented the observation that there was a distinct variation between disciplines in the "scope" for individual students to put forward their own opinions and perspectives on a topic.

> CA What do you think helps you to take part in these ones, then?
> St31 Uhm. Is personal views I think, more than anything. Ehm. It's personal interpretations as well. There seems more scope for that in these subjects.

Personal interest, or lack of interest, in a particular topic within the overall content of a course was described by most informants as a very important influence on how they prepared, took part and listened within individual tutorials. The two short extracts below, (the first from a third year Economic and Social History student and the second from a third year Nursing Studies student), provide an illustration of the way in which participants talked about the very considerable effect that "interest" in individual topics had on their tutorial performance:

> St38 .. if I enjoy the actual topic then it's a lot, eh, an awful lot easier, the actual, to actually sit there reading, to actually speak in the actual group. But if I am given a topic and it's not very interesting or it's whatever, I'll just switch off and not bother a lot of the time.
> St2 If the topic 's something I'm really interested in then it will almost come naturally that I'll listen and then take part. If it's something that's, ehm, I'm less of interested about, I mean you sit back and be a bit more passive about it – throwing in the odd thing – thing, here and there.

It was noted by some participants that the manner in which lecturers and tutors dealt with a subject could either increase or diminish their interest: and a few recounted instances where tutors had been able to arouse their enthusiasm for topics about which they had had no curiosity prior to the tutorial.

Personal knowledge of the specific topic which was being discussed featured strongly in the account that most students gave of the factors which influenced their participation. Turning from knowledge of specific topics to the effects of students' general familiarity with the content of a discipline, Chapter 5 has examined how increases over the years of students' undergraduate careers in their *general background of knowledge of the discipline* allowed individuals to contribute more to the discussion.

Personal knowledge could only be achieved, of course, by investing time and effort in studying. Participants indicated the importance of themselves individually and the group collectively putting in *appropriate preparation* for the tutorial, in terms of reading relevant literature or acquiring familiarity in solving a particular class of problems. They recognised that achieving a good, and highly interactive, discussion was dependent on students coming along to a tutorial possessing the requisite knowledge. As a much later section of this chapter will reveal, strong disapproval was expressed against fellow students who came along to tutorials unprepared and who were, therefore, unable to contribute appropriately to the discussion. The dire effects that inadequate preparation might have in reducing the level of student participation and in increasing that of the tutor were vividly portrayed in the following extract from a second year Social History and Sociology student who recalled how:

> St30 I mean, for example, last week in Sociology, well I hadn't done the reading either. I had looked at it but I hadn't done it in any depth, which you actually needed to do and so in the end the tutor ended up really giving us another lecture.

Participants talked of how the preparation that they could achieve for tutorials was constrained by the competing demands of *other coursework*, principally essays, that had to be completed. It was noted by informants that the pressure on tutorial preparation time and effort from other coursework

was often not so great in the early part of an academic term but could become severe towards the end of a term "as the work builds up"(St26). The effects that competing demands on time and effort might have on preparation were described by one third year Nursing Studies student in the following terms:

> St3 students do have quite a bit of work to do, you know, and every lecturer and every tutor in each department thinks, you know, taking their subject [laughing] ehm that they can't understand why you haven't done the reading for that week. And you're doing about two outside subjects. And you're also wanting to concentrate on your main – project, you know. You haven't always come as well prepared as perhaps you might have done, they expected you.

The other coursework which students had to complete was very often formally assessed, whereas tutorial work is not at Edinburgh University; and participants described candidly that assessed work tended to take precedence. Here, for example, is a participant whom I knew from my own observations to be a very conscientious, well-prepared, student noting how:

> St13 I think the trouble is when it all coincides with essays. Because the essays are the ones that get marked, it's that which takes dominance ...

Some participants, particularly those in their first and second year, viewed effective preparation as a matter which depended not only on their own investment of effort and time but also on the forward planning, and instructions given, by the tutors. (An account has already been provided of the problems that may arise when first year students, lacking a grounding in a particular discipline, are not provided with specific enough advice on preparing for a tutorial.) Preparation was regarded as easier to accomplish when tutors provided well focused reading and a clearly defined topic for the next tutorial. In the words of one second year Social History student:

> St27 With History it's a lot better because you're given a specific, detailed question and you know exactly what you're looking for.

In presenting the features identified by participants as important for promoting active participation and listening, this overview section of the chapter has given some sense of how participants talked about the role and authority of the tutor, their fellow students' actions and responsibilities and

the connections between tutorials and other parts of a course. As was indicated earlier, these three areas will be examined in considerable detail in the subsequent parts of the chapter, starting in Part II which focuses on the participants' talk concerning the role and authority of the tutor.

PART II

The tutor's role and authority and student preferences for how discussion is structured

This part of the chapter will examine closely the participants' expectations concerning how tutors should exercise their role and their conceptions of both the legitimate authority that tutors could claim as subject experts and teachers and what counted as an illegitimate, unacceptable exercise of tutor power. The first section examines the informants' expectations that tutors should demonstrate a *personal interest* in their students and how they construed the nature of the relationship that they believed should obtain between tutors and students. The topic then shifts to participants' talk on what constituted *unacceptable displays of tutor authority* where an attempt is made to give an exact sense of how informants distinguished between what they viewed as the legitimate and the unacceptable exercise of authority. During the course of this section, it will be established that, in effect, tutors were being asked to strike a balance between the pursuit of potentially conflicting goals. For example, tutors were expected to observe, what could be described as, students' negative freedom, to be secure from undue pressure to take part and their positive freedom, their right to be drawn into the discussion. The following section, *knowledge, authority and participation* presents and analyses informants' reflections on the nature and effects of the asymmetries that arise from the tutor's possession of greater subject knowledge than students.

The preceding overview has established that participants expected tutors to teach, rather than simply confine themselves to facilitating debate. Given the comparative neglect in previous research work on university discussion groups of this matter, it seemed of particular importance to look closely at how participants viewed the tutor's role as teacher and commented on specific episodes of teaching which they had found helpful. Accordingly there is a quite lengthy section that reports on informants' descriptions of

individual teaching actions and teaching sequences which they had found to be of considerable value.

After highlighting particular types of *teaching actions* which the participants identified as good practice, this part of the chapter goes on to present an analysis of the participants' talk on how tutors structure discussion. There can be considerable variation in the way that tutors conduct groups, some preferring a fairly wide-ranging discussion while others favour a style that keeps discussion clearly and fairly tightly focused on a topic, or set of topics. Whereas the participants' talk concerning the tutor's role and authority revealed a commonly shared set of assumptions about the moral order that should prevail in tutorials, it will be shown that there was a clear division of opinion among the participants in their *preferences for how discussion is structured.*

The tutor's role and authority

'Personal' interest

Looking at the whole corpus of interview material, it can be seen that participants expected tutors not only to discharge the responsibilities that were associated with their *position* as facilitators and teachers but also to show an interest in students as individuals. Making the same point in a slightly different manner, there was an assumption that tutors ought to act towards students in ways which reproduced certain of the features of *personal* relationships rather than acting solely from their institutional *position*, role, as educators. If one were to construct an ideal type of the 'good tutor' as seen by students, (on the basis of the talk provided by the participants in their interviews), the ability and willingness to provide a sense of personal contact would have to be one of its central, defining features. In the participants' accounts, 'good tutors' were characterised, in part, by their possession of knowledge about individual students, their recognition of, and interest in, the student's individuality and their relaxed, informal manner. Accounts of 'unsatisfactory' tutors were marked by references to social distance, lack of a display of personal interest and absence of knowledge concerning individual students.

It was regarded as particularly unsatisfactory if tutors did not know students by name. In the following extract, for example, a fourth year Psychology student reminiscing on her experience of a "really formal" first year Business Studies tutorial gave a strongly expressed mark of disfavour to a tutor who did not know the names of his students. It seems reasonable to read this statement as a protest by the participant against the tutor stripping the members of the group of an essential aspect of their identity, individuality:

> St43 He didn't even know our names. It was calling people, like, you know, what do you think of this, what do you think of this. And it just doesn't work. People don't turn up.

In a somewhat similar vein, a third year Nursing Studies student commented favourably on tutors who did display some knowledge of her as an individual and disfavour towards tutors she had encountered who had not remembered her name.

> St2 I think it's being, you know, actually knowing that your tutor knows who you are. [slight laugh in voice -->] It's actually quite a nice feeling, and there are four people about who you know I've had for varying things in the past; and they don't actually remember your name and your eh, ehm. In a small department that's quite strange where some of the tutors who are higher don't know who I am, as opposed to Psychology 'n, umh, the head of a course will come up, and actually call me by my first name, and I'm quite taken aback.

As we saw earlier, some participants contrasted tutors who were routinely playing their role with those whose interaction with students was marked by a quality of involvement, personal engagement. There was an expectation that the tutor should both play the part of a good tutor in a wholehearted manner and demonstrate a more *personal* response to students. This expectation can be observed, for example, in the following extract from an interview with a man in his second year studying Sociology:

St11 It's nice being in where someone's got the time for you as well, rather than them sort of feeling that it's part of their job, they've got to have us and they're just trying to.
CA So it's not just a job
St11 Yeah
CA It is actually
St11 Yeah
CA of some interest and –
St11 Yeah.
Like [Tutor X] seems to, quite, get into it quite a bit. Whereas other people you get a feeling that you are almost trespassing on their time. It makes you feel uncomfortable.

Some participants commented on how it was easier to establish encounters between tutors and students that were more personal in their tone when the tutorial group was smaller. For example, a medical student, (who at the point of interview was studying for Psychology honours and taking part in fourth year Psychology tutorials), contrasted her dissatisfaction with the impersonal nature of large first year Medical tutorials and her feelings of anonymity in this setting with her experience in small final year Psychology tutorials. She talked of how in Psychology:

St44 there are only three or maybe two people at the tutorials so that's all right. And obviously you're working a lot closer with the tutor. You feel more like a person in the tutorials.

In addition to displaying their assumption that tutors *should* act towards students in an engaged and personal way, the participants' talk in interviews identified the instrumental value for group interaction of the tutor having knowledge about the student members. The tenor of student remarks on this matter was that gaining some knowledge about individual student's capabilities and ways of interacting with others allowed tutors to tailor their interventions to respect the individuality and encourage the contributions of each group member. Conversely, when tutors did not have a sense of how individual members were likely to react, (perhaps because the group was too large to make it possible to acquire knowledge of this type), it was much more difficult to facilitate the group in an appropriately sensitive manner.

A third year Nursing Studies student, for example, commented in the following terms on what she perceived as the difficulties that could arise in

group interaction where students were not "known" to the tutor and vice versa:

> St8 You have to be very sensitive to the people that are in the tutorial group and I think that loads of subjects people, the tutors don't know their students; and the students don't know the tutor and – so you can't really, and you only have one hour a week, you can't pick up on their personalities and you've got different tutorial groups. 'N it should be possible for the tutor to know the people who speak more and speak less and know the people, know the group in order to facilitate the group from [sic] getting as much out of itself as it can.

Another instrumental value of having a more *personal* relationship with a tutor was highlighted by a third year Economic and Social History student, who noted that:

> St36 Also if you're having essay problems, it is much easier to talk to a tutor if you know them, well not if you know them but if you can call them by their first names, if you could stop on the street and have a chat. It's much easier to do that because then it's not like a student/tutor, it's just, it's more personal than that...

During the whole course of her interview, this student placed a particularly large degree of emphasis on the importance of an informal, personal relationship with a tutor. Although her statements on this matter may have differed somewhat in degree from those made by other students, they did not differ in kind. She can be seen as articulating somewhat more strongly a theme that was common across participants' accounts, and the following words from her make an appropriate ending to this section of the chapter:

> St36 by the tutor making themselves more accessible will mean that the students will respond better. And also the fact that, you know, we're no longer speaking to him, it's nice not to have to go ehm Dr.[X]. It's nice to, just to go Bob and I think that. I don't know how to explain it, but the fact that you can do that shows that they have a little bit of respect for you – do you know what I mean?
> ..... there's no longer this Sir/student thing and I think that's quite an important [matter].

Whereas tutors who displayed a personal interest in students and acted to minimise social distance were looked on with favour by the participants, strong negative opinions were expressed against tutors who overtly displayed their power, thereby highlighting the asymmetry in position between themselves and their students. Some participants also were strongly of the opinion that a tutorial was a much less successful experience when the asymmetry in power between the tutor and students was accentuated. This opinion is succinctly expressed, for example, in the following extract from the interview with a third year Nursing Studies student:

> St1 it is supposed to be sort of a group and if they're having, if it is an authority, and a sort of student figure, you're not as likely to be relaxed and give as much in the tutorial. You feel it's more a lecture/school situation.

On analysing all of the interview material concerning perceived overt asymmetries in power, it was clear that more was at stake than individual preferences for a more relaxed, informal atmosphere or a concern for how a more formal relationship might inhibit discussion. Participants also indicated that certain tutor actions which clearly marked the differences in status between tutor and students *ought* not to occur. Such actions were seen to conflict in an unacceptable way with the expectations established by the informal, 'democratic' form of discourse which customarily prevailed within tutorials.

The interview with the third year Economic and Social History student who was quoted at some length on the importance of the personal element in tutors' relationships with students, provides a strongly expressed account of such an incident where the tutor's assertion of her authority was viewed as breaching the moral order that ought to exist in tutorials. Here is her representation of the incident:

St36 Ehm there was a, I think a really sad, ehm, example that, ehm, where [Tutor X] – there was this mature student and he's married and he's got grown up kids and he had to miss a tutorial ... because his daughter was off school ill and [Tutor X] said to him "And where were you last week?" [" " in a challenging tone of voice] and he was like, oh, excuse me, miss. Because I, mean, how can you, I mean, he was actually older than her and he was like being give-, being told off in front of all of us and how humiliating and I think that that was one point in which her whole tutorial just fell apart; because it was like, he was the, he was being told off for being late, for chewing in class and I think that was completely wrong and her tutorial, that tutorial was just a disaster, because of the way that she was stamping her authority on it and that's wrong. ..... Yeah, I thought, no you can't do that.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in the two quotations presented above, and in the comments of other participants, the explicit assertion of tutor authority was likened to the authority structure characteristic of schools. This comparison with schools, might be read as an affirmation by the participants of what they viewed to be their rights as autonomous adults to certain forms of respect.

The expectation that one should not be treated by a tutor in certain face-threatening ways and in particular that one ought not to be embarrassed by having failings pointed up for public scrutiny is evident in the following extract from a third year Nursing Studies student:

St8 And I really resented that, because that tutorial is not for the tutor, it is for us and they should be there in a facilitative, ehm, role to make the students to discuss the things around the topic that they want to. And if, and also in an, eh, information giving or steer in particular areas ... or these kind of things but not to take over and to apportion her – well blame on who hasn't done the reading or, or make, ehm, people feel uncomfortable. And I used to come out of those tutorials feeling really uncomfortable.

In this extract the participant can also be seen as making a distinction between the legitimate exercise of the tutor's authority as a teacher in "information giving or steer[ing discussion] in particular areas" and the illegitimate use of power to moralise or to make individuals feel ill at ease. (A following section of the chapter will examine in detail the set of expectations that the participants shared on how tutors ought to exercise

their role as teachers and use their knowledge for the benefit of the tutorial group.)

In the preceding extract the participant clearly stated her belief that the tutor should not "take over", play too dominant a part in the proceedings. This belief that tutors should exercise restraint in using their power to control the flow of discussion was a common one across informants. Disfavour was expressed towards tutors who were perceived to exercise too tight a control over the discussion. In the words of one participant the tutor should not act as "a dictator". Another common complaint was against tutors who spoke too much in tutorials. This was viewed as "a waste of time", an unacceptable reproduction of the one-sided pattern of communication characteristic of lectures which had no place within tutorials. One strong strand in the criticisms made against tutors who talked too much was that this loquacity infringed students' own rights to speak and to be heard.

Continuing to explore types of tutor actions that were viewed as unacceptable uses of power, a number of informants expressed the belief that undue pressure should not be placed on individuals to participate. It was felt that individuals should not be asked to participate in a way which they found personally threatening – what one informant described as "being put on the spot". At the same time it will be recalled that the informants saw the tutor as having a responsibility for involving everyone in the discussion, a duty to be active in soliciting contributions, particularly from the quieter members. In effect then the tutor was asked to walk a fine line between observing students' positive freedom, entitlement to be drawn into the discussion and negative freedom, to be safe from undue pressure to participate.

A sense of these different entitlements, and of the potential conflict between them, was evident in the interview with a informant in his first year studying English Literature, Social History and Sociology, as the following extract indicates:

St31 And I think it's, it's funny because ehm I think people should be made to contribute but, ehm, if they don't want to then I don't think [very slight laugh] they should be forced, you know.
CA Yeah.
St31 Eh, but if, if –
CA [interrupts?] So encouraged strongly but not
St31 Yeah.
CA feel coerced. Is right, yeah?
St31 Definitely, yeah.

Other informants pointed up another set of circumstances in which the need to balance positive and negative freedoms arose. The summary provided at the beginning of this chapter described how participants expected academic staff *to tutor,* to work actively with students in developing understanding of a topic, rather than confine themselves simply to facilitating debate. However, the interviews also revealed the expectation that these teaching duties needed to be weighed against the social obligation not to cause students any considerable loss of face in front of their peers. Expressed in somewhat different terms, there was an assumption that academic staff should pursue an active tutoring role *but* be careful to do so in a way which respected individual student's public face and rights.

A succinct illustration of how students talked about the manner in which tutors should exercise their authority and obligations as teachers is provided in the following extract from a third year Accountancy student. The quotation highlights the possible tension that might exist between the teaching requirement of exerting pressure on a student to construct a new understanding and the need to act in a socially sensitive manner which did not threaten the individual's sense of face.

St22 It's good when they, they can push you without sort of making a fool out of you and that – the Accountancy department 's good for that.

The extract provided below from the interview with a second year Sociology student can be read as distinguishing between the tutor 'legitimately' pursuing actions which will enable the student to gain a better understanding of a topic and using his or her authority in a threatening, unacceptable manner.

St12 As long as like the lecturer doesn't put you down. Like, if you were wrong, I don't like being talked to like: "Don't be stupid" – a bit like. Whereas if they're trying to use the fact that I'm debating the point to see how I understand something; and then to explain why I'm wrong, if I was wrong.

To summarise the main thrust of the analysis in the preceding pages, participants believed that the exercise of the tutor's authority and obligations as a teacher had to be embedded within a democratic form of discourse where respect was accorded to the rights of individuals and face-threatening actions were avoided.

Knowledge, authority and participation

In my position as observer of small group discussion, it was evident that tutors did attempt to minimise differences in status and power by observing the forms of a democratic discourse, but asymmetries that arose from the tutor's possession of greater knowledge of a particular discipline remained. In their talk during interview, the student participants revealed their own keen awareness of these asymmetries in knowledge and their effects. One principal effect of this asymmetry in knowledge, which was recognised by a considerable number of informants, was that it led to the tutor needing to play a quite large and active part in the group discussion. The following quotation, (from a first year Nursing Studies and Psychology student), provides an example of how participants described the effects of differences in subject knowledge on the ratio and the nature of participation between tutor and students:

St52 I know the tutor doesn't – like it – the difference between school is the tutor doesn't necessarily have to play a big part in it because it's more us .. but they obviously have more knowledge about it. Ehm, so in Nursing our tutor would contribute something or she would ask a question or somehow relate it to a question and she'd throw it out and we'd discuss it again.

The talk of some participants on the matter of the tutor as a subject expert not only described how the tutor's greater subject knowledge led him or her to take a very active part in the tutorials. It also presented the tutor's expert knowledge as *justifying* her or his leading role within group discussion, as a source of legitimate authority. The next quotation gives a brief illustration of

how participants viewed the tutor's authority as a subject expert and of the expectations concerning the tutor's role that might flow from a recognition of asymmetries in knowledge. A second year Social History student stated his opinion that:

> St33 the tutors they're suppose to eh, supposed to conduct the discussion really, they've got more depth than all of us ...

The complexities and tensions which emerged in the talk of some of the participants when they discussed the tutor's role as teacher and subject expert are well illustrated in the following, brief quotation from a second year Sociology student.

> St15 I don't think [Tutor X] act-, says this is his views and everybody 's got to agree or disagree with that. I think he, he understands what people are saying and then he corrects them if they're wrong basing on what, on, basing on the reading and that sort of thing and what, and sometimes what he thinks.

The participant appears to be distinguishing between the tutor imposing his views on the group, which would be an unacceptable action, and an approved teaching action of "correcting" student statements. This act of correction might, however, on occasion centre around the tutor presenting his view of the topic, "what he thinks". The quotation would seem to highlight the importance from a student's point of view of the manner in which a tutor presented a perspective on a topic and the immediate, local, purpose that was being achieved.

Chapter 5 has examined how, as participants gained experience and knowledge of particular subjects over the years, they described a change in the quality of their interaction with tutors. There was a decline in the intellectual, and its associated social, distance between tutors and students. For a very few participants some fine shading needs to be added to this picture of change over time in aspects of what Abercrombie called the 'authority-dependency' relationship. Their talk revealed change over time but also some tensions within this movement forward related to a continuing sense of reliance on the tutor as a subject expert. Tensions of this type are evident, for example, in the two extracts beneath from the interview of a fourth year Psychology student:

St45 [Tutor X] in some ways she hasn't contributed that much although she's – merely because we've talked too much. But I wish she'd sort of said more – because she obviously knows the stuff; and we don't, or I don't. Yeah. So in some ways I would rather she told me than [Student X] tells me.

.....

she's very good but eh – possibly ehm, just, I suppose I mean she thinks at this stage that we should know. We shouldn't need her help, which is true. But actually at times you'll find yourself wanting things – what childish you can get.

Another aspect of students' perceptions of the tutor's authority as an expert practitioner of a discipline emerged in the interviews of a few informants. These informants had a concern to obtain some feedback from tutors on the extent to which positions that they had stated in discussion were viewed as tenable within the discipline. They wanted an honest evaluation of their statements which would indicate whether or not they could carry any weight within the discipline.

A third year Economic and Social History student, for example, inveighed against particular tutors who "won't ever commit" themselves, who were not willing to deliver a judgement of this type – to use their authority as subject expert either to back up the student's statements or to refute them. She went on to observe that:

St37 I can see why they do it to try and just make you think and not sort of pin you down to anything: but I'd rather, like, have a bit of an idea about whether I'm what, what I'm saying has got any worth or not, before I put it in an essay, for example.

This topic of the authority, warrant, that students felt that they could claim for their own statements in debate, or award to the contributions of their peers, will be examined further when the participants' perceptions of their fellow students' actions in tutorials are considered later in the chapter. An example of one method that a tutor might use both to warrant individual contributions and highlight their importance in the understanding of a topic was provided by the first year Nursing Studies and Psychology student who was quoted earlier.

St52 ... my old tutor she was really good. Eh, and she used to stop people quite often; and she would either say, "Right, I think that's a good point". And that makes everybody else sit up and think well I really need to consolidate what they've just said. Ehm, and then maybe she would comment a little bit about it;

A theme of this section has been the respect that participants showed for tutors' subject knowledge – their view that this constituted a 'legitimate' source of authority. However, it needs to be noted that there were bounds set on this respect. A number of participants drew attention to the exact purpose that tutors were achieving in displaying their subject knowledge. Using subject knowledge as a means of enhancing the tutor's own public image or as protection against reasonable challenges from students was viewed as unacceptable, as opposed to the legitimate use of subject knowledge to enrich discussion and enhance students' understanding. In the following quotation, for example, a fourth year Nursing Studies student acknowledges the considerable subject knowledge possessed by a tutor whom she respects and expresses her appreciation of the fact that this knowledge is not exploited to increase asymmetries in power and social distance.

St6 Plus she's just so. I don't know and she's very much on the same level as you in a sense. You know, she's – it's not like you're sitting with this person with very tutor status. [Tutor X] knows a lot but she doesn't use it to – to protect herself.

Teaching actions

Turning from questions concerning authority and subject knowledge, the present section will look at how the participants described this subject knowledge being put into practice, their general expectations concerning the tutor's role as a teacher and specific teaching actions which they particularly appreciated. Recapping quickly, first, on the general expectations that participants possessed of the tutor as a teacher, these can be described in a straightforward manner. Put simply, but accurately, tutors were expected to teach, not simply to facilitate discussion. For example, a mature student, studying second year Social History, expressed this expectation in a forthright fashion, when he stated that the tutor's role was:

St28 Not just to lead the discussion, yeah, I think it's important to make sure that you're teaching at the same time, and passing information over that you think students are going to need to back up the lectures or reading.

There were differences between participants in the extent to which they stressed the need for the tutor to be actively engaged in teaching during the meeting of the group. However, even for those participants whose talk during the interview suggested that they favoured a very 'student-centred' tutorial of the type described by Abercrombie, the tutor was still expected to play a role as teacher. A third year Economic and Social History student, who argued more strongly than other participants in favour of a student-centred discussion, still recognised both the value of the tutor's teaching actions and his or her authority as a teacher to take corrective action when the students' statements were at variance with received opinion within a discipline:

St36 The tutor is, is there to, sort of, guide the discussion and maybe come in with, sort of, maybe, where you're going a bit astray ...

This expectation that tutors would act in their role as subject experts and teachers to right discussion which had gone "a bit astray" occurred commonly across the interviews. Participants talked of the need for the tutor "to correct" or "to clarify" student contributions to the discussion where necessary. This was viewed as a legitimate exercise of the tutor's authority and indeed a type of action which the tutor *ought* to perform. In line with the view of how tutors should display their authority examined in preceding sections of this chapter, it was assumed that 'corrective' teaching actions ought to, and would be, carried out in a socially appropriate manner.

The talk of a few participants drew attention to the fact that there sometimes was a need for the tutor not only to correct and clarify individual contributions made by participants but to ensure that the debate as a whole was covering the subject matter in a suitable way. These participants recognised that a tutor might need to intervene in discussion and employ her or his authority as subject expert to ensure that students gained a "balanced" view of the topic. For example, a third year Nursing Studies student described how:

St1 in first year and things like that all the time you, you are quite intimidated ehm – by information people are giving you. You tend to believe a lot of what you get. I mean, I think, sometimes it would be helpful for the tutor to point out that that's not the only argument on it, because you tend to – be convinced that it is [slight laugh] if somebody is quite forceful in the argument. Just to point out the pros and cons to give it more of a balanced ideas, or not, if you're not getting a balanced idea.

Staying on the matter of "correcting", refining, students' statements, a number of informants indicated their displeasure when tutors did not work with an individual who had made an 'incorrect' statement to construct a different understanding of the topic, but simply went on to invite contributions from other students. Indeed, these informants could be read as suggesting that tutors had a responsibility to ensure that students who had a 'wrong' conception of a topic were assisted to construct a more appropriate understanding. Conversely, other informants expressed their appreciation for tutors who did take the time to assist individuals to come to a better understanding of a topic. Appreciation of the attention that had been given to her as an individual, in addition to the value for learning, when a tutor asked for "clarification" is evident in the following extract from a third year Nursing Studies student:

St8 Usually I like to be asked to be clarifying, because it shows that someone 's listened to what I've said and there are certain things that they want me to expand on; and that's good.

To illustrate further how informants talked about this particular expectation of the tutor's role as a teacher, here is a third year Economic and Social History student who commented that:

St35 I think it can be very demoralising if, if you say an answer and it's wrong: and the tutor will just go on to another person and say: "Well what do you think?"
CA So am I right in thinking that you'd feel happier if they went on to – to ask you to expand and clarify, is that?
St35 Yes. Yes.
CA is that true?
St35 That's right.

Elsewhere in her interview she stated a similar point and also introduced the topic of the teaching tactics that a tutor might employ to assist a student to

reformulate her or his position on a topic. Being more specific, she pointed up the importance of a tutor giving directions on how to pursue the topic:

> St35 I think that's where it's important to have this, this process of leading a, a fork-mile[1], to the answer, because I think even if you say something, even if it's wrong, then that, then the tutor should, should encourage you to think along the right lines as opposed to going to somebody else ...

This participant saw that bringing "this process of leading .. a fork-mile to the answer" to a successful conclusion, might require more than giving a few, simple hints. She recognised that there might be a need for tutors to engage in a more extended process of structuring and supporting students' attempts to construct an acceptable formulation of a topic. This teaching process might involve tutors "maybe ask[ing] a related question and bring[ing] their thought processes round" (St35). She also talked in very approving terms of a particular tutor:

> St35 who was very good at that, and she made a point of asking everybody, ehm, even if they weren't sure of the answer, she would ehm encourage them to think through a thought process and maybe arrive at that.

A type of questioning strategy which a participant in her second year studying Sociology found of very considerable value, is described in the following extract. It can be seen from the quotation that the participant welcomed not only the intellectual direction that was provided by the tutor's "lead questions" but also the fact that in providing these lead questions the tutor was supporting her efforts to contribute to the discussion.

> St14 normally the tutor will back you up, follow up and say, "Yes, but do you not –?" You know, he can sort of ask little ehm questions, little lead questions that: "Would you not think, it's more this –", and you think "oh, yeah, well" and go on like this.
> CA Is that useful?
> St14 Yeah, that's useful. [laughs] Put you on the right track.

Another second year Sociology student drew attention to the benefits that came from tutors a) being able to imagine how students might be interpreting a topic and b) engaging with students in an interactive process

[1] A fork-mile is a sign post.

of "clarifying" understanding of a particular topic. The following two extracts, (from different places in his interview), illustrate how he described both of these benefits:

> St11 having an encouraging tutor helps rather than [slight pause] [slight sigh] someone who is obviously very clever but so clever that they can't see your problem, because they understand it. It's nice having someone that can see why you've got a problem.
> St11 Often you sort of say something and it's, ehm, a bit unclear. So it's nice for them to sort of help them sort out what you mean and help yourself sort out what you mean.

In the second sentence of the second extract above, there is an interesting observation on the way in which the 'diagnosis' by a tutor of a student's difficulties and the construction by the student of a new personal understanding of a topic may be intimately connected. The following short quotation from another part of his interview demonstrates, possibly even more clearly, his appreciation for tutors whose talk constructs a space within which students can think:

> St11 It is nice when it's, it is built upon and twisted around and things. It gives you room for thought.

This same participant also recognised and valued the ways in which tutors enriched a group's examination of a subject by introducing "new aspects" to the discussion and encouraging the development of a more differentiated view of topics which had surfaced in the discussion. He talked in approving terms of the times:

> St11 When they're [tutors] trying to get new aspects involved; and when they're trying to sort of develop things which have already been mentioned.

A third year Accountancy student gave an account of the actions of a particular tutor which clearly revealed the tutor's *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) of the students' problem-solving. It is interesting to note how the participant distinguishes between the direct transmission of information which is seen as not being useful and the beneficial effects of the tutor guiding, structuring, the student's own exploration of a problem. The participant would seem to view the tutor's scaffolding activities not only as compatible with but indeed as a strong aid in "thinking for *yourself*". To my

mind, this statement provides a very interesting insight into how learners may view their own agency in "thinking" and conceive of the practice of thinking.

> St22 Yeah, he won't tell you the answer, he sort of makes you think for yourself but he sort of prompts you along the lines. I mean he won't come out and say what the answer is, but if you don't get it somebody else might be thinking along the same lines.
> C So you are quite happy with that.
> St22 So and Accounts – that is a good way. I mean there's no point of being spoon fed all the time, and if somebody tells you the answers even you'll see. That's not doing you any good. You're not thinking for yourself. And in the way he does that it sort of, it does make you think. It structures your – your thoughts.

In a somewhat similar manner, another third year Accountancy student described how certain tutors are skilled at 'correcting' students' statements. His words can be read as an observation of the tutors' expertise at *drawing in,* "bring[ing] .. round", students' understandings towards expert positions in the discipline. They also express an appreciation of the fact that this process of "bring[ing] it round" is accomplished in a sensitive manner which is not at all face-threatening.

> St20 You normally find tutors that can sort of like, they don't say you're wrong, but they can sort of work, work it round so that you realise that you were wrong. Yeah, I mean so, you agree with eventually.
> CA So that they're quite skilled at –
> St20 Yeah. I mean you find that. You know, they never say, oh you're wrong, put it that way, sort of laugh at you or whatever. It's the – it's the way they do it, sort of, getting you to bring it round.

Another teaching action which some participants singled out as of great value was the tutor insisting on the very clear and precise formulation of statements, including the exact use of technical terms. For example, a third year Accountancy student commented in very approving terms of the demands that a particular tutor made for clarity and precision in argument and the use of language. A brief illustrative section of the student's talk on this topic is presented beneath. (From my own observations this tutor did indeed require students to communicate with appropriate precision, but his

requests for greater clarity and rigour in the use of terms were made in a 'democratic', unthreatening manner.)

> St24 ... he's very, very pernickety in – if your meaning 's not a hundred per cent clear, he'll disagree with you.
> CA Yeah. Do you find that useful?
> St24 It is helpful, yeah ...

It seemed appropriate to conclude this section with a quotation from the interview with a woman in her second year studying Sociology. This quotation provides yet another, sensitively observed, student perspective on what are helpful teaching actions on the part of the tutor. It can also, however, be seen as drawing together and summarising a number of the key points that have featured in the accounts that have been presented in the past few pages. In particular, it stresses the themes that have been highlighted in participant comments presented earlier of how tutors "shape" a student's ideas towards an acceptable formulation within the discipline and achieve this shaping by working in a very interactive way with the student. The quotation also stresses the positive affective and motivational effects of this interactive shaping of student understanding and the correspondingly demotivating consequences of a tutor failing to display both an imaginative sympathy with a student's efforts to formulate a point and the appropriate teaching actions.

> St13 I do find useful – [Tutor X] does this, and my first tutor last year did as well, if you come across a point which you know isn't very clear, it's just an idea they'll often elaborate on it; and sort of, maybe, shape it in a way that you, you'd thought of it, but you hadn't really got it in that perspective. And I find that useful and also very encouraging, whereas other, if tutors sort of sit there and you can't bring a point across, not as well as you could do; and they'll sit there and they won't make that effort to understand you. That really discourages you from saying anything.

(This participant will again be the focus of attention in Part IV of the chapter within the section *Problematic talk on problems*. That section will examine her thoughts on the need that may exist for tutors to work with novices in a very interactive way on the construction of distinct problems out of a vaguely shaped sense of difficulty.)

Student preferences for how debate is structured

The chapter now turns to how participants regarded the contrasting styles of structuring debate that a tutor might adopt. The Methodology chapter has described how very little attention whatsoever has been given in previous research on small-group teaching to the subject of students' stylistic preferences concerning the structuring of discussions. It seemed important, therefore, to examine this matter in some depth within the present study. Accordingly, the participants were asked whether they preferred a more free-ranging or a more focused discussion. The pattern of responses to this question revealed wide, and fairly evenly distributed, differences of opinion on this matter. Responses to this question could be categorised for fifty-one of the fifty two interviews. Sixteen students indicated a preference for a fairly focused to focused discussion, and eighteen students preferred a fairly wide-ranging to wide-ranging discussion. Nine participants elected for a 'middle-of-the-road' position, using phrases such as "middle line", "happy medium" to state their choice. Seven students did not indicate an overall preference but stated that what they viewed as a desirable and appropriate style of structuring talk would vary according to the subject area, or even the individual topic, that was being discussed. In the words of one participant, St49 "That depends on the subject" and of another, St50 "I suppose it depends on the topic you're discussing." One mature student firmly believed that in the first two years of the undergraduate degree discussion should be clearly focused and in the third and fourth years more wide-ranging.

The following two quotations provide some sense of how participants talked about their preferences concerning the structuring of discussion. The extracts come from interviews with two third year women students who were members of the same Economic and Social History tutorial group:

> St37 I want it to be always very focused. I want it. I don't like them to be just. They are a waste of time if you just sit there and everyone just talks about what they feel like talking about.

St36 I don't like that when tutors focus all the time because I think that's wrong, because I think that one of the important things about learning is that you maybe go on along sort of one line but the fact that you realise that that connects to something else, I think is crucial in learning ..... it is to me very important to understand the relationship between two things which maybe initially you don't think of relating but as you go to discussion you think oh maybe they are, and I think that's very important...

Extracts illustrating an equally sharp division of opinion could have been drawn from a number of the other tutorial groups which were sampled in the study.

Many of the informants accounted for their stylistic preferences concerning the structuring of tutorial talk, presenting arguments in favour of their choice and highlighting what they saw as the advantages of having either a focused or wide-ranging discussion. A central theme in the accounts provided by students who preferred a more wide-ranging style of discussion was the importance of extending knowledge and interest in the subject, an emphasis on the intellectual benefits of *wide* coverage. In the words of one third year student:

St17 ... it expands your horizons. It broadens your knowledge of the topic.

A subsidiary theme in some accounts, as in the extract presented earlier from the woman in her third year studying Economic and Social History, was the opportunity that this wide coverage provided for establishing the relationship between ideas.

Aside from this central theme of the intellectual benefits that were perceived to come from a wide, flowing coverage of a subject, there was another matter which was emphasised in the talk of quite a number of the informants who favoured a wide-ranging style of discussion. These informants perceived student freedom of expression and influence over the flow of discussion as key elements in a tutorial; and believed that a large degree of student control over talk could only be achieved when discussion was structured in a fairly free-flowing manner. The views of this group of participants resonate with Abercrombie's writings on the authority-dependency relationship.

As a brief illustration of the way that certain students who preferred a more free-ranging discussion linked together the structure of tutorials and the issue of student control, here is an extract from a third year, male Accountancy student:

> St19 I think a more wide one – ranging discussion. I mean if it – it's not really beneficial to the students if you've got ehm; if the tutor's concentrating on one topic that he wants to concentrate on.

In a similar vein, the following quotation from a third year Nursing Studies student forges a connection between the structure of a tutorial and the need to respect and to pursue the contributions made by student participants:

> St3 I quite like it if it goes a bit wider. I think it's – you know students mention that for a reason, you know, you might as well explore that.

This explicit concern with questions of authority and of student influence over the progress of discussion was not evident in the comments of those participants who preferred a more focused style of discussion. Whereas the advocates of a more free-ranging discussion emphasised the importance of *width* of coverage, the predominant theme in the arguments presented by students who wished to have a focused tutorial discussion was the intellectual benefits associated with examining a topic in *depth*. The following two extracts give a clear illustration of this concern to have a particular subject examined in some depth. In the first, a woman in her third year studying Economic and Social History indicates that:

> St35 I think I prefer a, a tighter structure. I think because it gives you more to go on. And I think you get more out of the tutorial. Whereas with a wider subject you only have an hour really to cover, ehm, quite wide topics or concepts. And I think sometimes you feel that you haven't really, you've only covered the basics, but you've not really gone into it in any depth.

In the second, a fourth year student highlights the need that she perceives to gain a deep, fine-grained, understanding of particular topics:

> St41 I prefer sticking to the topic you've been given. We need to get to know every nuance. You're just skimming really on the surface, really, going wide. I mean you're going to stick to a much narrower topics then it's easier.

Another informant who very much shared the wish to see a focused in-depth discussion of particular topics, voiced the opinion that in her experience a wide-ranging debate might take an inappropriately 'personal' form and lose its academic raison d' être. In her own words:

> St37 I mean it comes, it becomes, there comes a time where people are just simply airing their views and they're not really thinking about the issue, the issue concerned.

Subject variability

Some informants, however, did not state an overall preference for the type of in-depth focused style of structuring talk that has been discussed in the last few paragraphs, or for a wide-ranging discussion. Instead they indicated that what they saw as a desirable and appropriate style of organising talk would vary from subject to subject.

In talking through and justifying why their preferences concerning style of tutorial talk would vary according to subject area, some participants drew attention to the way in which some subjects seemed to lend themselves to a broad discussion of issues while other subjects, by their nature, required discussion to stay tightly focused. For example, here is a third year Accountancy student drawing a clear distinction between the structure that is appropriate to two, very different, Business courses:

> CA So is part of what you're saying then that you think the subject determines whether it should stay focused or go wider?
> St18 Yeah. I would say so. Yeah. Uhah. Like Behaviour [in Organisations] 's quite a dis- , yeah, it's discussion and everyday stuff. But Financial [Accounts is] fairly based on standards and there's set ways of doing things so it's not so wide.

Another Accountancy student, talking on this topic, sets out his belief that there is a strong inverse relationship between breadth of discussion and how abstract the tutorial topic is:

St24 ... but eh this time my half's Management Science and no scope at all I am afraid for that. [smilingly] If it's not really at all, well I'm saying it is, obviously it's a real live subject but, but it's not one that eh, you can, you open the paper and you don't see Operational Research Man whatever. .... Whereas you might get something like, ehm, you know – Hanson Trust takes over Beta, big page and you can have a natter about it because it's news, but eh the more abstract the subject, the more, the further away it is, you know – life as we know it, the harder it is to have a broader discussion about it. And that's when you can get a broader discussion –

Staying on the topic of subject effects on the structuring of tutorial talk, it is of interest to note that three of the participants saw a free-ranging discussion as being particularly appropriate for History. To illustrate the manner in which these three identified the virtues of a wide-ranging style of discussion for history courses, the following quotation presents the thoughts of one of them, a third year Nursing Studies student. This participant had an overall preference for a 'middle-of-the road' position on the structuring of debate. The quotation not only highlights the benefits of a free and wide flowing style of discusion for History. It also demonstrates a clear awareness and appreciation of the skills that a Social History tutor displayed in both facilitating, and giving coherence and some helpful elements of structure to, a wide-ranging discussion.

St8 .. but in the Social History one our tutor would often go into real tangents: but that's because it was on, soc-, well Social History ehm it's relevant to go onto tangents because it's relevant to go from, from the present to the past, and to make analogies and to discuss analogies and, ehm, and that was very useful and it made the subject more than a subject and something that was real for you: and she permitted it and encouraged it, it was good we felt. But she would keep bringing back threads that were relevant to what we were talking about so we would never lose our place, so we would never think how we got here, 'cause it would be ehm – it would be a path that you'd recognise going away from and coming back to.

Another of these three, a fourth year mature student, (who had a general preference for a wide-ranging discussion), used the example of Urban History to present a similar line of argument on the importance of ranging widely in a historical discussion:

St28 that's when you have to widen the discussion in tutorial groups to make sure there's a continuity from one century to the other, and that there was no sharp break from the pre-industrial town to the industrial town because it was a long process.

Implications for tutorial practice

One useful way of reflecting on the whole set of comments that has been examined in the preceding pages, and of framing these comments within the literature on student learning, is to relate them to Pask's work on learning styles. Some of the descriptions given by participants of their preference for either a more wide-ranging or more focused discussion can be seen to have parallels with the contrast which Pask has drawn between *serialist* and *holist* learning styles. To recap on the description that was provided in Chapter 2 of the contrast that Pask (1976) has drawn between *holist* and *serialist* learning styles, a holist delights in illustrations and analogies and sets out to learn new material by trying to gain a broad overview of the topic. In contrast, a serialist learner prefers a fairly narrow focus on the material that is to be mastered, building up understanding in a step-by-step logical manner. It will be recalled also that Entwistle (1992, p.21) in a review of the implications of Pask's work noted how: "if lecturers exhibit extreme lecturing styles, either holist or serialist, it seems inevitable that students with the opposite style will find those classes uncongenial and difficult. Yet lecturers are free to indulge their own stylistic preferences, however extreme, while students have to make the best of relative degrees of mismatch with their own preferences." The accounts given by participants of their preferences for a wide-ranging or focused discussion would seem to give force to Entwistle's claims in the preceding statement, and to indicate the applicability of these claims to tutorial groups, as well as lecturing. The implications for tutorial practice of the set of findings concerning stylistic preferences for the structuring of talk will be explored further in the Discussion chapter.

Although Pask's scheme of *serialist, holist* and *versatile* styles of learning provides a useful device for framing and understanding the differences that exist between participants in their preferences concerning the structuring of discussion, it is a framework which needs to be used with care. Certain parallels can be seen between the descriptions that informants provided of their preferences for discussion styles and the contrasting cognitive styles

identified by Pask. However, it would be wrong to view the differences in preference on this matter *solely* in terms of variation in cognitive styles. As the analysis of student comments in the preceding pages has shown, some informants provided a justification of their preference for a wide-ranging style of discussion in terms of student freedom of expression and control over the flow of debate – in terms of a particular social order that they believed should prevail in tutorials rather than a narrowly cognitive preference.

PART III

Perceptions of fellow students' actions in tutorials and actively debating a point with another student

The preceding part of the chapter has examined in some detail how participants conceived of the tutor's role and authority within the group. This close focus on the tutor's role needs to be balanced by an analysis of how the participants viewed the responsibilities and actions of their fellow students within tutorials. Accordingly this third part of the chapter will focus on how informants perceived their fellow students' actions in tutorials, starting off by looking at how they described themselves making gains in *learning from other students within the tutorial.* In the following section, *the warranting of students' knowledge,* it will be noted that for some of the participants the gains that could be derived from the contributions made by their peers to discussion were somewhat qualified by concerns relating to the authority that students could claim for their knowledge.

Attention then shifts from the benefits that could come from the contributions of other student members of a tutorial group to actions that attracted censure. The participants' strong dislike of the behaviour of "*dominant students*" is described and their talk concerning dominant students who deviated from the expectations for appropriate behaviour provides insight into some of *the norms governing tutorial interaction*. The next matter examined is the very small amount of participant talk which is relevant to the theme of *gender and tutorial interaction.* Aside from looking at what participants had to say on gender related issues, possible explanations for the paucity of talk on this topic are presented. This examination of gender related issues is followed by a consideration of the participants' talk on their collective *responsibility to prepare* for tutorials.

As Chapter 2 has indicated, some previous research work on small group teaching has been influenced by the belief that there may be considerable differences in the perceptions of tutorials held by 'quieter' students and by

'more talkative' students. Possible points of contrast between the more talkative and quieter group members have also been investigated in this current study, and two sections of the chapter present the *perceptions of the more 'participative' students* and the *perceptions of the quieter students*. These two sections also aim to give a picture of how each of these sub-groups perceived the other.

The chapter then returns from this close focus on the views of two sub-groups of informants to examine how the whole set of informants viewed debating a point with their peers. It will be shown that there was a clear division of opinion among the participants in their expressed willingness to engage another student in debate. *The benefits of engaging others in debate* identified by some informants are considered and the way in which informants described *engagement with the content of debate*. Attention then turns to consider those participants who declared a *reluctance to challenge others* and details the reasons that they gave for not wishing to engage other students in debate. The last sections in this part of the chapter look closely at the conditions *affecting willingness to debate*, the topic of the *manner of issuing a challenge* and how participants responded to *being challenged by other students*.

Perceptions of fellow students' actions in tutorials

Learning from other students within the tutorial

Looking first, then, at the benefits to learning that participants identified as accruing from the contributions that other students made within tutorials, these benefits were seen as existing at two levels. Participants talked of the *general value* of learning from other students' knowledge and *specific* gains in the *clarification of understanding* and *gaining new perspectives on a topic* that came from discussion with their peers. The following two brief extracts from the interview with a third year Nursing Studies student illustrate the way in which the theme of the general value for learning of other students' contributions emerged in the participants' talk:

St8 it reflects quite a lot of different people's experiences, and different people's reading and different people's, ehm – background on the subjects, for example.
Because everyone has things that they're more expert on than others and more than or less expert on than others; and we all have things that we can share with each others ...

The first of these two extracts encapsulates neatly the different types of knowledge that fellow students brought to tutorials which participants valued. In addition to noting the benefits of the pooling of academic knowledge within a tutorial, informants often pointed out that the sharing of knowledge gained from life experiences that were different from their own could enhance their understanding. Students bringing knowledge and perspectives gained in *another discipline* to tutorial discussion was also seen as being of considerable worth, as is evidenced by the following quotation from the interview with a second year Sociology student:

St12 I like it actually when students reflect on things that happened in their own life, do you know what I mean? So you can, yeah, get into it. And I like it when they talk about things that they've done in other subjects. You know, say, well when they say well this applies to something I've done in Geography or –
CA So add another perspective?
St12 Yeah. Because you don't. I have not done Geography. You don't see that perspective at all – which is good.

For another second year Sociology student a perceived advantage of peers giving a paper within the tutorial was that the presentation of subject knowledge was likely to be pitched at an appropriate level, as opposed to her experience of a particular lecturer on her Sociology course:

St15 And the guy at the moment 's just taking all these examples and eh, I just don't understand what's going [on in current Sociology lectures]. But, mmh, the tutorials you understand a lot more; and when people do these presentations it helps it. Because it's in your own sort of level.

Dropping down from the level of the general benefits to learning that were seen to flow from other students' contributions, the following paragraphs will examine the participants' talk on the specific gains to understanding that came from discussion with other students.

One specific benefit that quite a number of informants saw themselves as having gained from their fellow students during tutorials was assistance with difficulties in understanding a particular topic. Statements made by other students were viewed as helping one to "clarify" thinking concerning a topic and to construct a new understanding of a problem. The advantages that could come from 'peer tutoring' are clearly identified in the following brief extracts from two third year students:

> St16 if you're stuck on something, maybe other students understand that, explain to you and help you.
> St18 Sometimes students have thought of things in different ways and that helps to, ehm, maybe clarify something you haven't quite understood.

Participants also talked of the valuable role that their fellow-students could play in providing them with ideas concerning, and perspectives on, a topic during the course of tutorial discussion. As one third year Economic and Social History student noted:

> St37 'Cause some people [raise] some of the things, you'd never even thought of. 'N they're quite useful actually. 'Cause they'll think of arguments that never have occurred to me.

Another third year Economic and Social History student described how an active exchange of viewpoints with her peers in a tutorial could lead to a richer, more differentiated, understanding of a topic:

> St36 And other people, I mean, eh, I found are very, very useful when you're maybe speaking and somebody comes in and says oh, "well, what about it like this", or "what, what do you think about this aspect of it", and you think, oh, well I never actually thought of that before, well what were you thinking about; and it does all click together and you find that you get a much better overall view if, if there's, ehm, greater discussion ...

In a similar fashion, a third year Nursing Studies informant (for whom English was a second language) talked of how in her view gaining "clarification" was a key goal to be achieved in tutorials. She saw the sharing of insights between peers as a principal means by which the clarification of ideas and the construction of new understandings could be achieved. She talked, for example, of how valuable it was:

St5 When people were putting across new idea or idea that help you to a different, a change in your own idea ...

She then went on to note the mutual gains that arose from such an exchange:

St5 Yeah. I'd say that was a two way change.

Another participant, in his third year studying Accountancy, described the feelings of satisfaction which he experienced when a "spontaneous" exchange of viewpoints moved collective understanding of a topic forward.

St23 [I like] probably the spontaneity if, if you're on a point and everyone 's thinking along the same way, if, if they can chip in their own bit in and expand on what – the topic you're discussing. I think that's great. I think the stimulus is there.
CA And things begin to flow.
St23 And you know when everyone is rolling then it's good for, from that point of view.

His words resonate very strongly with the theorising and the research that Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) have produced on the significance of the "flow experience" in the understanding of intrinsic motivation.

The warranting of students' knowledge

The account that has been given up to this point of how participants talked about learning from their peers in tutorials may have suggested that this was seen as an unproblematic, wholly beneficial, transfer of subject knowledge, framing perspectives and reflections on life experiences. For some informants, however, the value that could be gained from the contributions made by their peers was tempered by concerns regarding the authority, the 'warrant', that students could claim for their knowledge. These worries concerning the authority of the knowledge and arguments that fellow students presented in discussion surfaced, for example, in the comments that some participants made on the matter of taking notes from the contributions made by their peers to discussion. The following extracts, taken from the interviews of two third year Accountancy students demonstrate considerable reservations about the trustworthiness, authority, of the statements made by other students, and require no gloss:

CA Would you take notes sometimes from what other students chip in as well as the tutor?
St16 Yeah. Probably. Well it depends. Usually, if I'm confident that I agree with, then I probably would. Eh, as long. Usually if the tutor seems to back it up as well obviously I take it down. But usually the tutor 's the one – well I would prefer to stick with someone who obviously totally knows more.

CA [Do you take notes] From other students' contributions or just the tutor?
St17 Eh from both. Mainly the, the tutor. Eh, I seem to trust what the tutor says more than the other students.

It is understandable that such attitudes towards the contributions made by peers should be held in a subject like Accountancy where precise definition of technical terms is very important and exactly specified procedures have to be followed. However, reservations about the authority of statements made by peers during tutorial discussion were not confined to Accountancy students. Similar comments were made by students following quite different subject choices, so these reservations cannot be explained solely in terms of a 'discipline effect'. The following extract from the interview with a first year student studying English Literature, Sociology and Social History strikes a note of caution similar to that expressed by the two Accountancy students. (It is worth noting that this informant emphasised both the value for learning and the enjoyment that he gained from students sharing ideas within tutorials. He argued strongly against tutor 'dominance' in tutorials and for a 'student-centred' type of discussion which fitted very closely the pattern that Abercrombie suggested tutorials should follow.)

CA Do you find you take notes much in tutorials, or not?
St31 Ehm. [pause] I do in Social History because, eh, she controls it a lot more. Hum, so you feel that what she's saying, you know, you have to write down. Uhm, mm, which I don't know makes it less of a discussion. Uhm the other two, it's just, it's just views that ah people are sharing, ehm, if I think something 's good then I'll write it down; but I don't feel that I have to write it down, you know. Uhm, because it's not, it's not the tutor that is saying it.
CA So you think that makes a difference? [<-- smilingly]
St31 Yes, it does. Yeah, it does. [laughs] Uhm that's my, that's my prejudice.
CA Not the same authority. [<-- smilingly]
St31 Yeah.

On this matter of the degree of trust, of authority, that could be given to other students' statements, a strong contrast in view was evident between two participants who were drawn from the same second year Sociology tutorial. One, a male mature student argued vigorously for the benefits to be gained from students sharing knowledge and ideas with each other and believed that much more ought to be done to encourage collaborative learning. He advocated the virtues of "mind-maps" as a means for students to structure knowledge of a topic to other members of his tutorial group, (and to myself during his interview). However, as the following extract from her interview reveals, a woman within his tutorial was not altogether convinced by his advocacy of a more collaborative approach to learning and of mind maps as a tool to implement this approach. She had considerable reservations about her own authority to instruct her peers on a topic.

> St12 The idea that some – he was saying that when you do your presentation, you should do a mind diagram to go with it and then hand that out to everybody else; and everybody else would revise off your mind diagram. And the idea of someone else like trying to revise off my – the way I understand things: it would put a lot of pressure on me, because I think well what happens if I get it wrong and then people try and study from it. Which would, which could make you feel a lot more pressurised, a lot more uneasy in tutorials if I felt the people were trying to study from what I once did. Like I don't mind sharing my essays around; but the idea of people taking your essays as like a formal answer to a point would worry me because I think, well, you know, I'm not a lecturer.

To the best of my knowledge, the research literature on collaborative learning in general, and peer tutoring in particular, has given little attention to the concerns raised by some of the participants in the present study which have been outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Guidelines for good practice in setting up collaborative learning also tend to overlook this question of the degree of warrant which individuals feel that they can give to their own efforts on behalf of a group and award to the contributions made by their peers.

The last few pages have examined the specific actions on the part of their fellow students which participants identified as contributing to their learning and enjoyment of tutorials. Moving now to look at actions of their peers which were viewed in a negative light, a chief dislike was of students who dominated the proceedings, and thereby denied others their fair share of participation. It needs to be noted that this dislike of "dominant" students was not confined to those informants who took little active part in tutorials, but was also shared by informants whom I knew from my observations to be vigorous participants in discussion.

A very similar vocabulary was used across interviews to describe this dislike of students who took too large a share of the floor. They were described as 'dominant', "too dominant personalities", "domineering", "very dominating", and other variations on the verb dominance. Phrases such as "hog the whole group", "hog the discussion", "hog the tutorial" were also used across interviews to express disapprobation of these individuals who were seen as being over assertive.

It has already been stated that the principal charge laid against these "dominant" individuals was that they took over an unfairly large share of the tutorial talk. Some informants also objected to the manner in which these dominant individuals staked their claim to be heard. They portrayed these individuals as intervening within discussion in an inappropriate, socially insensitive fashion. A first year student, for example, talked of how:

> St31 there's some people who, who just interrupt, uhm, when somebody 's trying, you know, or attempting to give an answer or starts off, ehm, because they know it, they'll say it.

Condemnation of socially inappropriate interventions is also evident in the following extract from a third year Economic and Social History student:

> St38 Some people sort of hog the group, you know what I mean, hold it. Ehm. That annoys me. Ehm, because what's, what's sometimes happened is we have someone speaking and then this other person will just suddenly butt in, and that, that quite annoys me, it's just bad manners more than anything else.

Some participants criticised "dominant students" not solely for grasping an unfairly large share of the interaction within the tutorial and for doing so in an insensitive fashion, but also for being over-concerned with their own self-presentation. Talking primarily for the sake of getting oneself noticed in the group, "you know like trying to give up all the time every single time" (St19) was frowned upon. Among the hostile comments directed against self-aggrandising students was the following extract from a third year Accountancy student, (who in general commented about his peers in a very fair-minded fashion). It is apparent from the extract that he was quite sharp in his criticism of those students who not only had a great deal to say but were pretentious in their talk:

> St23 Possibly verbosity for the sake of it, I would say. If, if you're answering a point or something, if you are using vocabulary which you are not comfortable with and you're using them for the sake of using, that I think can get on my wick sometimes.

The talk of the participants concerning "dominant" students which has been examined in the preceding paragraphs portrays them as transgressing certain of the norms of conduct which should prevail within a tutorial. Indeed by the very act of discussing the dominant who deviate from the expectations for appropriate action, some of the norms guiding everyday student practice within tutorials are thrown into sharp relief. The informants share the expectation that there should be a fair distribution of participation rights and that individuals should not claim more than their fair portion. Discussion of this topic also revealed the expectations that interventions should be made in a socially appropriate and sensitive manner and that individuals should not use tutorials simply as a vehicle for their own self-presentation.

Some of the discussion of dominant students also provided a very interesting insight into how participants saw the responsibilities and role of the tutor. Common themes in participants' discussion of this topic were that responsibility for preventing individuals dominating tutorials lay squarely with the tutor and that individuals "hogging" the tutorial was a sign of failure on the part of the tutor. In other words, tutors were expected to play an active moderating role in discussion, controlling the vociferous and bringing in the quieter members. This expectation was expressed very

succinctly, for example, in the following extract from a second year Sociology student:

> St13 I think it's maybe quite important that tutors try and avoid having too dominant personalities, uhm, because that often works against quieter members of the group.

The need for firm action on the part of the tutor to deal with the dominant was expressed in a blunt manner by a third year Accountancy student who talked of how "big mouths":

> St22 ...they seem to ruin it for everybody else. I mean whenever the tutor says anything, they're sort of jumping in; but then I, maybe a good tutor can spot this, and then he can go and ask other people, sort of thing. Sort of silence the, the few heavies.

Another third year Accountancy student pointed out that a few students might dominate a group by default, if the tutor did not act in an appropriately proactive way to bring all of the members into the discussion:

> St19 I think the tutor has got to make an attempt to try and bring in everybody. I think [Tutor X] is very good at that – because he does try to get everybody to say at least something during the tutorial which some others don't do. Which is, you know, you get three people who dominate the discussion all the time and then the others just sit by, you know, sit on the sidelines and that's not a good thing.

The opening part of this chapter highlighted the fact that participants had a general expectation that tutors would energetically apply the skills appropriate for facilitating debate. The talk concerning dominant students that has been considered in the preceding paragraphs makes clear that being adept at controlling the contributions of individuals and of bringing in quieter members to ensure that they enjoyed their participation rights were seen as important elements of this set of facilitation skills. It is of considerable interest to note that none of the participants in the present study talked of themselves, individually or collectively, taking on the role of moderating the behaviour of students who were transgressing the norms of appropriate tutorial conduct. They appeared to view this task as belonging to the tutor, rather than themselves, and on this matter at least were not demonstrating the shift in the authority-dependency relationship that Abercrombie wished to see.

Staying on the theme of inequalities in participation, the literature on small-group interaction has drawn attention to the fact that gender-related differences in interactional style may place women at a disadvantage in mixed-sex groups (Fishman, 1978; Spender, 1982; Luke, 1993). Given that the topic of gender differences in interactional styles and the effects of these differences is viewed as an important topic by small group researchers, I had anticipated that a fair proportion of the participants in the study might raise gender issues in tutorial interaction during their interviews. However, this did not happen. In the whole set of interviews with student participants, there were only a few, scattered references to gender and tutorial interaction. The paucity of comment on this matter might be attributed in part to the fact that I as a male researcher was not well placed to elicit comments from women on gender-related difficulties in tutorial participation which they had experienced. It might also have been the case that I was simply not sufficiently alert and sensitive to this set of issues. Another possibility is that a lack of comment on gender matters was not solely an artefact of the nature of participant interaction with this particular researcher, but also a reflection of the fact that participants did not customarily, spontaneously, frame tutorial discussion in gender terms.

This last possibility is lent plausibility by the observation that a very small quantity of comment on gender issues is not an isolated occurrence in interview studies of tutorial interaction. Shuttleworth in her thesis on participation in university discussion groups, (which has been reviewed in Chapter 2), found that her informants made very little reference to gender-related issues. She noted that in the whole set of interviews that she conducted:

> "Gender as a dimension of discussion inequality has not been raised often. .... Apart from these brief insights, students seem relatively unaware of interaction from a female-male perspective." (Shuttleworth, 1992, p.638).

The very few remarks that were made on gender-related matters in the present study centred on the question of male dominance within tutorials. For example, a third year Nursing Studies student described how in subjects

other than Nursing, "Usually guys ehm dominate the conversation." (St3). (Within Nursing Studies itself, tutorial groups are usually wholly composed of women students.)

Another participant did not indicate that she found 'male dominance' a problematic matter within the general run of her tutorials; but she described how she found it a considerable problem within a particular tutorial. This particular third year Accountancy tutorial had a very unequal gender ratio, of eleven men to two women, and was perceived by the participant as having a very male-oriented, competitive atmosphere which severely inhibited her own participation. The following extracts present some of her talk on this topic:

> St18 I also feel in that tutorial there's a lot of male rivalry, you know ..... It seems to be, you know, who's done the most research and thing. I don't know, I think that group is fine at everybody but I just do feel intimidated by the boys.

The student went on, at a slightly later place in the interview, to argue for the need for a more balanced ratio of the sexes within this tutorial. Her words give a rare glimpse into the problems that may arise for women in tutorial groups where males dominate the proceedings, or where there is a perceived, 'male' competitive atmosphere that they may find uncongenial. Further research work which is focused on gender issues within university discussion groups is required to establish whether the inhibiting effects of male rivalry and dominance described by this participant are commonly, or only infrequently, experienced by women.

The discussion on the previous page has acknowledged that the nature of the interaction between interviewer and participants, or a lack of sufficient attention to gender issues, may in part be responsible for the fact that there was only a very small quantity of participant talk on gender-related matters. These methodological caveats need to be borne in mind; but it still strikes me as an important finding that there was so little talk on this topic. To borrow a phrase from Sandra Bem, the participants in this current study did not appear to be viewing tutorials through the "lenses of gender" (Bem, 1993).

Responsibility to prepare

A preceding section has examined the participants' beliefs concerning a fair allocation of participation rights within a tutorial. Notions of fairness also featured largely in the comments that students made concerning the failure on the part of some of their fellow-students to prepare adequately for tutorials. Complaints about other students not working for tutorials were fairly common across the interviews, and often these complaints were made with considerable feeling. It was clearly an issue which exercised the informants; and their talk on this topic gives an insight into the 'moral economy' that they believed ought to prevail within a tutorial.

Two main thrusts can be discerned in students' talk on this topic - one concerned with the practical consequences of a failure to work and the other with a moral condemnation of lack of effort. Looking first at the practical consequences of a failure to prepare, informants described how a lack of preparatory work on the part of their fellow students led to problems in tutorial interaction. Participation levels were reduced and sometimes only a small subset of the group who had prepared took an active part in the proceedings. The following very brief extracts, (the first from a second year student and the following two from third year students), give a flavour of the way in which participants identified a clear link between inadequate preparation by their peers and tutorials failing to "work":

> St30 And that is I think the biggest obstacle, some people haven't done the work.
> St39 And, eh, I felt my main criticism of a lot of the tutorials is that you get a block of reading to do, and only one or two people do it so it's one or two people that have the, eh, sort of tend to talk about it.
> St35 .... that's like tutorials are now. They work maybe if people have done the reading.

In addition to identifying the undesirable consequences for the quantity and quality of participation of a failure to prepare, the participants revealed their belief that such a lack of effort was intrinsically wrong. It was viewed as unfair and "selfish" for an individual to benefit from the work that others had done in preparation, if he or she had not put in any personal investment of work to the collective effort. Implicit in this view was the assumption that all members had responsibilities to the group and that if the responsibilities to

prepare for the group were not discharged, their rights to gain from the discussion were compromised to some extent.

To illustrate how participants talked about the moral order concerning effort and rewards which they believed ought to prevail within tutorials, here is the first year male student, (studying English Literature, with Sociology and Social History as outside subjects), who was quoted earlier in the chapter, presenting his view of the efforts that individuals should invest for the group:

> St31 it annoys me if people haven't done anything, you know, if they can't contribute – uhm because that's taking not giving so to speak ..... it's almost selfish if, if they're getting all these ideas and not giving anything of their own.

In a similar vein, a mature student in his fourth year, studying Social History, condemned a particular individual in one of his tutorial groups who never did any preparation and noted that: "I don't like sort of just this laziness to extreme"(St28). He then went on from this ad hominem attack to reflect in more general terms on the topic of making an appropriate effort at preparation:

> St28 But occasionally I do go in without, sort of, done the reading and then just take lots of notes, and that's a wee bit parasitical because I'm just sort of getting all the knowledge that everybody else gained down on paper and its' handy for revision and whatever else; but, ehm, in general I don't like the type of people who come every single tutorial knowing nothing about the topic, contributing nothing to the discussion, sit there, obviously say nothing because they know nothing and you can see they don't, they have not done it and they shuffle around their things like that and look self-conscious, ... So it's crazy – ehm, there's no point in being here unless you put some effort into it.

The expectation that other students should demonstrate a reciprocity in investment of effort was evident not only in talk about preparation for tutorials in general. It also featured in the accounts that some informants gave of how their fellow-students might fail to react appropriately to the work that one of their number had invested in presenting a paper to the group. Here, for example, is a woman in her third year of Nursing Studies describing her "irritation" when fellow students fail to match her own work in presenting a paper by giving an attentive, informed response:

St2 I probably do have a slight [short pause] slight irritation if you've done a lot of work in say presenting something; and people aren't, either aren't interested, aren't listening or didn't do the reading. That's, that's not squaring up to anyone. But I am sure the teachers have that all the time.

Perceptions of the more 'participative' students

The examination of participants' perceptions of, and expectations concerning, their fellow students' actions within tutorials has not focused in so far on identifiable sub-groups within the sample. However, the current and following section of the chapter will provide a somewhat finer grain of description by considering two groups which had contrasting patterns of participation in discussion. Some previous work on university small-group teaching, most notably Shuttleworth's (1992) thesis, has been guided by the assumption that there might be important general and specific differences between the way that 'more talkative' and 'quieter' students viewed tutorials. It seemed important, therefore, within the present study to analyse the views of those informants who took a large part in discussion and those who took little part, being alert to possible points of contrast and gaining a sense of how each group perceived the other. The identification of informants who participated either to a large or small extent in tutorials was based on my own observational work and on the informants' self-identification. It is of interest to note that my own categorisation and the informants' self-identification of their level of participation did coincide.

The following pages will reveal that a number of points of contrast can be found between the talk about tutorials of the 'participative' and of the 'quiet'. These differences, however, need to be viewed within a wider picture, rather than considered in isolation. Both the 'participative' and the 'quiet' shared the conception of what made for a good tutorial, (already examined earlier in the chapter), and shared norms concerning how students ought to interact with each other during tutorials. They also had a similar set of expectations with respect to the role that a tutor should play within a group.

Looking first at certain of the views of the more participative students, as one might expect, they themselves set a value on active participation within tutorials and expressed their appreciation of fellow-students who played an

engaged part in discussion. In the words of one member of this group: "I've got a lot of time for people that actually do get well involved in tutorials." (St22). Another informant, a third year Accountancy student, talked of how: "I think it's important to get involved and I enjoy the involvement aspect." (St24).

Some very participative students complained about their peers who did not take an active part in proceedings and implicit in their complaints was the assumption that all students were able to make some contribution to discussion. This belief that others "must have some idea" to present in the tutorial was made very explicit in the following expression of annoyance from a third year Economic and Social History student:

> St36 And I also don't like in tutorials when people just sit there and don't say anything because that really annoys me because I think well you **must** have some idea; and even if you think what [you] are saying is utter rubbish, or if you're agreeing with what I'm saying I'd rather you say it.

The *responsibility* for a failure to contribute was sometimes viewed by the participative as lying with the tutor rather than wholly with the individual quieter students themselves. Here, for example, is a mature, third year student expressing this view:

> St39 Ehm it does annoy me to a certain extent that, eh, students, eh, didn't participate, but I mean I think that's maybe to do with the way it's been structured than, than the individual students themself.
> CA So that's more the responsibility of the tutor?
> St39 Yeah, I think it's, ehm. Yeah, I would say that's more the responsibility of the tutor. Ehm, again it could be structured differently to make people read.

On the matter of the participative explaining why certain students tended to take little part in tutorials unless given direct encouragement by the tutor, a common way of accounting for a failure to participate was to see this as the result of a general disposition to be "shy". Some of the participative also talked about the very immediate face concerns that 'quiet' students might experience within a tutorial. For example, a first year Social History student explained the lack of participation of some of her peers in the following terms:

St32 Because I think they're probably scared in case they get it wrong, they're just scared you know making mistakes and eh, and em, yeah, showing themselves up or whatever but that's something you're going to have.

Another line of explanation that was pursued in some accounts was to view the failure to participate of some students in the earlier years of their career in terms of a lack of sufficient experience in communicating within a group.

The preceding page has described the value set on participation by this sub-group of informants and the feelings of annoyance that some felt when their fellow-students did not participate. They also identified some practical difficulties and feelings of discomfort that could arise for them personally when others in the group did not take a sufficiently active part. Some indicated that they felt a pressure on them to speak when others were being quiet. Alternatively others felt a need to curb their desire to participate when their interest was aroused in a topic if they had already made a substantial input to the tutorial. As a brief illustration of some of the feelings of discomfort described by the participative, a third year Nursing Studies student talked of how:

St8 basically what I see as well as being a problem, ehm, I don't enjoy groups when I feel I've been doing all the talking more or less.

On the need to hold back on one's interest in engaging in discussion, a first year Social History student, (who did participate quite actively in tutorials but in a sensitive, appropriate way) stated that:

St32 Particularly this week I felt sort of, you know, when she asks a question, I sort of, I know I want to say something, but actually I feel perhaps I shouldn't, because I've been talking for [laughing -->] the rest of the tutorial.

Awareness of the contrast between their own relatively high levels of talk in comparison to other members of the group also led some participative students to express worries about how they might be perceived by and affect other members of the group. A fourth year Nursing Studies student described her worries on this score in the following way:

St7 It is quite difficult because you can't really make somebody talk and – that can be quite hard because then if you do talk, then you can feel you're quite dominating, if you know what I mean. You're going on too much ...

Perceptions of the 'quieter' students

With the exception of a third year Accountancy student who was very intent on making sure that he did not expose any weaknesses in his arguments to challenge by other members of a group, self-protective face concerns did not feature in the talk of the more participative students during their interviews. By contrast concerns about a possible public loss of face were very salient in the interviews that were conducted with the 'quieter' students.

These face concerns were very often closely linked to an expressed sense of self as being less capable of making an effective contribution to discussion than others. For example, a first year student, whose words will be quoted again shortly, presented her own view of her capabilities in discussion by saying, "I'm not wonderful at presenting my ideas" (St52). One form of the view of oneself as being less capable in discussion groups which was expressed by certain informants was a belief that one could not cope well in debate. As an instance of this belief a second year Sociology student said:

St10 because sometimes I feel I'm not strong enough – that somebody else will start shouting me down ...

The powerfully inhibiting effects on participation of the beliefs that one was less knowledgeable about a subject than other students, or that one was less "clever" than certain fellow-students, were presented clearly in the accounts that some quieter students gave of their actions in tutorials. Concerns of this type feature strongly in the following extract from an interview with a second year Sociology student. The extract also points up how participation may vary across tutorials depending on how the knowledge, abilities and personality of other participants are viewed in comparison to self.

CA Yeah. Ah, OK. Just thinking about yourself in tutorials, do you think that you say a reasonable amount compared to other people or -?
St15 Ehm. [slight pause] No. I don't normally. I haven't said that much this term. Ehm, last year I did say a reasonable amount, ehm. But when, I almost like lack confidence when there's like people who have a lot more facts and are quite headstrong and everything, so I just shut up really.
CA So it would depend very much who was in the group, is that fair, rather than -?
St15 Yeah. Exactly. You know, I am just thinking well, "Well, he said all that. I might get something wrong". That sort of thing.
.....
St15 I understand what's going on. It's just sort of like lack confidence sometimes when there's someone who's really clever and that sort of thing.

Turning to look at certain of the perceptions which this subgroup held of more participative group members, quieter students explained the tendency of some of their peers to participate actively in tutorials largely in terms of what they saw as a stable internal factor of "confidence". Some informants also accounted for the greater level of participation of certain students by describing them as being "relaxed". Here, for example, is the first year student, who was quoted earlier, talking of how:

St52 I think it basically boils down to if people seem relaxed. Whether they're relaxed or not, I don't know. But some people do seem to be very laid back and eh able to comment. And that is what I like most about – when other people comment.

Implicit in the comments that a number of the quieter students made in comparing their own abilities and knowledge unfavourably to those of their peers, was also the belief that certain students played a large part in tutorials because they were well-informed and/or "clever".

For the more participative students, taking the initiative to speak was presented within their interviews as an unproblematic part of tutorial life. In contrast, some of the quieter students revealed that they saw making a contribution as something which had to be weighed up rather than entered into spontaneously. Certain of the quieter students also talked of how they would only intervene on matters which had particularly engaged their attention, on which they felt it was important to comment. This quality of

deliberateness in the decision of some quieter students to intervene in discussion is illustrated in the following extract from the interview of a third year informant, studying Economic and Social History. The quotation is also marked by a theme which was common in the accounts of the quieter students, and has been alluded to in a preceding paragraph, that whether or not they participated was dependent on a number of situational factors.

> St38 Ehm, it depends on the actual group. The actual people in the group. It also depends on the tutor. I mean if he asks me a question then obviously I'll try to answer it. Ehm, but if, if there's a group where they're just asking general a question somebody 'll be, will volunteer to answer. And I don't normally volunteer unless I, I really know what I'm, what about I want to say about it. I've got really quite a strong opinion about it.

Actively debating a point with another student

The current section returns from considering the views of the sub-groups of the more participative and of the quieter students, to examine the opinions of the whole group of informants on the topic of engaging another student in debate. Chapter 2 has revealed that a central aim of the advocates of small-group teaching, such as Abercrombie, was to establish an open, lively, engaged exchange of viewpoints between students and debate of issues. Accordingly it seemed necessary to explore in the present study how participants felt in a tutorial about debating a point with their peers. Where appropriate, informants were also asked how they felt about other students challenging them, taking them up on a point.

(It should be noted that considerable pains were taken over the content and style of questioning on these matters. I was very careful in both the wording of questions to students on this topic, and in my manner of speech, to make clear that I was enquiring about how comfortable they felt about engaging in debate on an academic question, as distinct from a personal challenge of any sort; and that there was no implication that challenging a peer on a point needed to be performed in a confrontational style.)

Looking first at the responses to the question on how students felt about engaging one of their peers in debate about a point, forty-six of the

interviews contained student comments on this matter which could be categorised. Twenty of the forty-six indicated that they were quite happy to debate a point with a fellow student in a tutorial, and seven were fairly happy but with certain reservations. Thirteen expressed either some or strong reservations. Three expressed very large reservations and stated that this was something which they would seldom, if ever do. In addition, one fourth year student, (who from my observations I knew to be very talkative in tutorials), said that he had never done so, and a woman in the third year of her studies said that this was "not for me". Another student in his third year said that he wouldn't directly but would try to raise the point through the tutor.

This picture of a clear division and spread of opinion was not matched in the pattern of responses to the question of how they felt about other students engaging them in debate on a point that they had raised. Compared to the question which has just been examined, fewer students gave a direct expression of opinion on this matter which could be categorised. Out of thirty-seven categorisable responses, twenty-six participants stated that it was fair that other students should engage them in debate on a point and did not indicate that they had worries about this happening. Three informants saw this as a fairly unproblematic matter, but did have some reservations about it. Six were clear that they did not feel comfortable about this happening. Two simply commented that this had never happened.

It is worth noting that of the six informants who were not comfortable about being challenged on a point by another student, four had either quite or very strong reservations about themselves issuing a challenge to another student and the fifth preferred that challenging another student took place through the tutor rather than in a direct manner. The three who had some reservations about responding to a student who took them up on a point, all had either some or strong reservations about themselves engaging another student in debate.

An analysis will be provided of the accounts given by participants who were not comfortable when other students challenged them on a point and of those of the much larger number of participants who did not present challenge by another student as a problematic matter. First though, it is

appropriate to examine in some depth how participants talked about themselves entering into debate with one of their peers or avoiding engagement.

The benefits of engaging others in debate

Certain of the participants who had declared that they were quite happy to take up a fellow student on a point, expressed the belief that very important benefits flowed from engaging their peers in debate. Two main benefits were identified by this group of participants as deriving from debating a point with one's fellow students: *lively, engaged involvement in the group discussion* and *the intellectual benefits of clarifying points and sharing differing perspectives on a topic*. The following quotation from a second year Sociology student illustrates the way in which participants described the first of these two benefits. After indicating her own willingness to take up another member of the tutorial group on a point, she went on to note the value of such an action in the following terms:

> St13 I think sometimes in our group, not in the sense of a raging, irrational argument but something where people have got opinions fired is quite productive because it can break down some barriers, and get people involved.

Turning to look at how this group of participants identified the ways in which engaging others in debate might clarify understanding and/or introduce new viewpoints on a topic, one informant drew a very clear, tight connection between argument with others and the clarification of her own understanding. In her own words:

> St36 ... that's really important because the only way, I think, when you can clarify what you're thinking is if you actually argue about it.

She then went on to note the manner in which her own ideas might be reshaped during this process of argument with others and how other participants might be drawn into the debate:

St36 Because otherwise I think you have quite an isolated view on what you think is right and that it gives a chance for you to, to see what other people think and maybe sort of take some of their views and sort of change yours a bit. So that I think being able to say "Well, actually I think this" is really good because it, it makes them think about their argument, makes you think about [if] you're right, and also it might open the way for other people to come in as well.

Challenge and active engagement with others in argument were also central features in a third year Nursing Studies student's conception of how understanding is advanced within tutorials. She talked of how thinking is 'disciplined' through challenge in the following way:

St8 It's the way you learn better by having your points challenged and questioned. And then they're forced to put them clearer or – to back up your arguments from evidence, that's what it should be about, you know, if you all sit there and say your piece you know that's not, not good for anybody.

A fourth year Psychology student linked challenging and arguing actively with other students to his understanding of the nature of the particular discipline that he is studying and of the values of academic life in general. Debate, and by implication challenging others to sustain debate, seems to be viewed by this student not just as a desirable but as a key element of academic life.

St47 I would tend to challenge them a bit more heavily than I should. Uhm. But. Yes. I've not got any problems with that. I think. I think it's to be – uh when you are aware, I mean and Psychology 's a subject where you're sort of more aware of that there can be differing viewpoints and that, ehm, it's not necessarily that one is true and one is false, but just that there are different views that can be held and etcetera .. I suppose that one of the values of a university is, is, I mean becoming aware that there is more than one interpretation that can be given to, to research ..... and discussion I suppose by its nature, implies by its nature that there has to be a couple of valid view points to be discussed, otherwise there isn't any discussion.

Engagement with the content of debate

Moving on from reviewing the benefits that certain informants saw as flowing from challenging other students on a point, there are aspects of the descriptions which some participants who were happy to debate a point gave of their performances that are of interest. Most accounts of taking up another student on a point centred around interest in the content of the debate, engagement with the ideas that had been presented by others, rather than the desire to promote one's image and position within the group. Here, for example, is a third year student, studying Sociology, describing how she becomes drawn into debate with others:

> St14 What normally happens is you'll have someone say something, you'll think, no, well wait a minute. That'll normally induce you to think – spark your, your thoughts. Like, "No, wait a minute, this what I think"; and I'll normally say it.

There were very few descriptions of 'challenging' actions in which self-presentational concerns with advertising one's knowledge, debating skills or status in the group featured prominently. A notable exception was a third year male Accountancy student who appeared to be very much driven by self-promotional concerns in addition to engagement with the actual content of debate. At the same time this individual wished to guard himself against making statements which might be challenged in turn by other students. Something of the vigour with which this student pursued debate with others is captured in the following short extract from his interview:

> St24 if I'm absolutely certain beyond a shadow of doubt that it's wrong, I'll have absolutely no qualms in shooting them down in flames.

Reluctance to challenge others

In sharp contrast to this student who saw challenging others as a means of self-promotion, the fear of losing face during debate featured in the interviews with some of the participants who were reluctant to pursue a point with a peer. Conversely, a number of the participants indicated that their willingness to take up other students on a point was very much inhibited by social sensitivity, a concern as to how any challenge would be perceived from the other person's perspective.

Although there was considerable variation from student to student in the grounds that were presented for not wishing to engage others in debate, lack of sufficient subject knowledge per se about the topic of debate was a common reason. Another theme which emerged in a number of responses was not so much lack of subject knowledge inhibiting debate, but *anxiety* concerning one's subject knowledge and its public presentation. Some participants talked of how they were reluctant to enter into debate with a peer unless they felt very "sure" about the strength of their argument or their knowledge of a topic. In a very few accounts yet another concern related to subject knowledge emerged. This concern was the student's perception that as a novice in a discipline he or she lacked the authority derived from broad and deep knowledge to make an appropriate challenge to a peer.

The following three interview extracts give illustrations of how participants talked about the concerns surrounding subject knowledge, one's own public face and the face needs of others which have been identified in the last two paragraphs. The first extract, from a male psychology student in his first year, points up how a lack of background knowledge in a subject may cause a student to be reluctant to engage in debate. It also highlights the fact that willingness to engage in debate may vary considerably across subjects, depending on one's level of knowledge.

> St48 Eh, in Psychology, yes. Ehm, I mean Philosophy of Science, I'm not really, ehm , well read in that so I wouldn't in that. Ehm. No.

The second quotation, from a first year Nursing Studies student who is studying Psychology as an outside subject, also begins by noting the effects of subject knowledge. The participant then presents the process of how she might decide not to engage another student in debate within a Psychology tutorial, and her anxieties become apparent.

St52 It depends how well I knew the subject. Eh. [pause] And also again if like in Psychology because I'm not still very sure about the subject, if I had a feeling maybe I don't really agree with that. If I could just make the comment I don't really agree with that, because and then they could come back. But if it was like I said if it was expanded, they said well why do you think that; why, what are you basing that on, I, I wouldn't feel so confident in maybe being able to answer that. And so I tend not to. Unless I, unless I felt very strongly – I'd probably. Then I also I'd probably sit there thinking about it too long and then the conversation would pass over, then I'd lose space for it.

In the following, third, extract there is a clear concern for the face needs of others and about a student's authority to issue a challenge to a peer. Here a second year Sociology student focuses on the need to be sensitive to the feelings of fellow students. Indeed in the first sentence in the quotation the shifts between "they" and "me"/"I" and the lack of syntactic agreement, suggest very forcibly the strong identification that he is forging with the feelings of others. He also views himself as often not having a sufficiently "qualified", warranted voice in any debate. (As a necessary piece of background information, it needs to be noted that this student was quite able and was achieving good essay marks. He described how he did prepare for tutorials; and I have evidence from my own observations that he had prepared well for a short paper which he presented in one tutorial.)

St11 I think it's, it's down to how – thinking how they'd feel if someone did that to me, or thinking how I'd feel if someone did that to me.
CA Do you want to say then how you feel, if you do say something to someone and a student challenges it?
St11 Ah. [laughs] I don't suppose I'd mind actually. [CA laughs] I don't know it – it. I think it's got a lot to do with the sort of qualification of the question. If it's a qualified – if you feel it's qualified or not; and I think I'd quite often feel it difficult to, to ask someone a qualified question when I'm just sort of in the same position as them.

Conditions affecting willingness to debate, manner of issuing a challenge

The last few pages have examined the distinct differences between the participants in the statements that they made on their degree of willingness to engage a peer in debate. There was, however, strong agreement on the set of conditions within a tutorial which increased the willingness to debate. An encouraging, "relaxed" facilitative attitude on the part of the tutor and the

existence of an informal, safe social atmosphere within the group were highlighted as being of key importance. In other words, the conditions that have already been noted to facilitate participation in general were identified by participants as being of particular relevance to this aspect of tutorial interaction.

Conversely, a number of the participants drew attention to the importance of engaging a peer in debate in a *manner* which would not threaten an individual's public face (and by implication the safe, informal atmosphere of the group as a whole). They stressed the need to deliver any challenge to a fellow student on a point in a socially sensitive and appropriate manner. In my reading of their accounts of this matter, they also appear to be suggesting that any challenge should stay centred on the *content* that is being debated rather than on the *person* whose point is being disputed.

An illustration of how participants talked about this question of the manner in which they might debate a point with another student is provided in the following extract from a student who was studying fourth year Psychology. The description that is given in this extract of "questioning" other students would seem to indicate that in debate with a peer she might take on a clarifying, 'tutoring' role, rather than simply issue a straightforward challenge:

> St44 Yeah, I feel quite happy about sort of challenging in a tentative way, more questioning than challenging anybody. Ehm. I would feel first that it might be their way of expressing it that I haven't got. Eh. So I would sort of ask them to expand on what they mean and then say, well what about that then.

Another informant, (who was certainly willing to take up other students on a point), noted how she would enter debate by focusing attention on her own "different opinion" rather than on the position adopted by the other student:

> St2 I wouldn't say it's not quite right, I'd probably say that I had a – I would approach it from saying that I had a different opinion. As opposed to actually challenging their [position].

A more 'extreme' version of this tactic of focusing attention on self, rather than on the other whose position one is challenging, occurs in the following comment from a third year Accountancy student:

> St18 I wouldn't say I don't agree with that, I'd probably say, you know, but I thought this was such and such a thing, making me out to be **wrong** [said with a smile in the voice], if it was trying to get clarified.

All of the three preceding extracts illustrate how some participants articulated their belief that any opening move in a debate needed to be made in a non-confrontational manner which did not threaten the face of the person who was being challenged. The extracts also give some indication of the individual tactics that might be used in putting such a belief into practice. Judged by their own statements at least, these three students, and other participants in the study, appear to be developing the ability to use an 'impersonal' style of argument. Turning to view this matter from the perspective of the tutors who participated in this study, Chapter 7 will show how one of the staff informants regarded the development of an impersonal style of argument as a "very important" acquisition, particularly for women. The final Discussion chapter of the thesis will also return to this topic of the importance of developing an impersonal style of argument.

Being challenged by other students

Moving on to examine the main themes which emerged in student comments on how they reacted to being challenged on a point by a peer; it will be recalled that, out of thirty-seven categorisable responses, twenty-six participants regarded this as an unproblematic matter. There were very strong commonalities between these twenty-six informants in their comments on the general topic of being challenged on a point by a peer.

Before describing the common elements in the responses of this group of twenty-six, it is worth noting that their talk on this topic tended to be brief. In particular, they had considerably less to say about being the object of a challenge than they had about themselves initiating debate with another student on a point. They appeared to regard being challenged on a point by a peer as a straightforward topic – one which did not require detailed comment.

The members of this group believed that it was fair that other students should engage them in debate on a point; and indeed viewed this as a taken-for-granted, and obligatory feature of tutorials. The statements of some members of this group also show that they accepted that having one's statements challenged by peers formed part of the process of learning.

To give some sense of the exact wording in which members of this group of informants commented on being engaged in debate by a peer, a few interview extracts are presented in the following paragraph. The first extract is from a first year Psychology student who has clearly already assimilated the norms concerning this aspect of tutorial interaction. The next two extracts are from men in their third year reading Accountancy. The modality of the verbs in the three extracts is of interest and is typical of the form of the comments made by other members of this sub-group. The use of "should" and "got to" suggests that this is viewed as a matter of social obligation rather than personal preference.

> St50 I think that's quite important that, you know, everyone should contribute and if you disagree with someone, one should say.
> St16 Fair enough, yeah. If they've got a good idea they should say. And obviously if they're disagreeing with me, they've quite a good reason for doing it.
> St22 Aye. We've all got to learn like. Nobody is ever a hundred per cent right.

For one first year student being challenged on a point by other students and challenging them in return was not only an accepted part of tutorial interaction, but also central to his own definition of how tutorials should proceed. He noted that when other students "come back at you" rather than the tutor:

> St31 ... it allows, people feel freer in having their own commentaries, or views, so it becomes more of a discussion, which, which, is what I thought tutorials were about.

In contrast to the group of informants whose views have been examined in the preceding paragraphs, it will be recalled that there were a number of participants who indicated that they did not feel comfortable about being challenged on a point by another student. These participants described feelings of anxiety and fears of being unable to respond appropriately which

such a challenge aroused. For them, responding to a challenge was not a straightforward, obligatory feature of tutorial interaction but a problematic matter. In the words of one first-year participant:

> St34 I'd get probably a bit embarrassed and panicky and probably not be able to back up what I've said.

A second year, Social History, student described how: "I just clam up if somebody did it to me." (St 27).

Fear of being an isolated voice responding to a challenge, as opposed to receiving the support of members of a group in debate, featured in the comments of a first year Psychology student:

> St52 Ehm. [considerable pause] Well it would – yeah. It would obviously help if you were supported by somebody else. I think if I was on my own. If I was the sole person, then I'd find it difficult. Ehm. But if I was, if I was part of a group of people that would help.

The preceding three short extracts serve as an indication that being issued with, and responding to, a challenge are seen by a minority of participants as rather threatening matters. Their accounts suggest that when they are required to enter debate their attention may be focused on self-directed face concerns rather than centering principally on the debate itself. It appears, therefore, that there are distinct differences between informants not only in how they conceive of engaging another student in debate; but also in how they view and describe themselves responding to having their statements questioned by a fellow student.

PART IV

Tutorials in context

Connections between tutorials and other aspects of a course

Chapter 2 which provided an appraisal of research on small-group teaching expressed some disquiet over the fact that previous research in this area has concentrated very narrowly on small group work as a discrete form of teaching. It was noted that more attention needs to be given to the connections between tutorials and the wider learning system in which they are situated. Accordingly there has been an attempt made in this interview study to investigate how students view the connections between tutorials and other aspects of their courses. This part of the chapter will report findings on how the students perceived:

- *the links between tutorials and lectures,*
- *distinctive contributions made by tutorials to a course of study,* and
- *tutorials as a forum where any problems with course content could be explored.*

Previous research work on small group teaching has focused on the tutor's role as a facilitator of discussion and no attention has been given to the potentially important role that a tutor can play in giving both general, and discipline specific, advice on studying. In an attempt to redress this imbalance in attention, the current section will also present informants' opinions on the *extent and adequacy of the advice that they received from tutors on essay-writing, exams and reading.*

Tutorials and lectures

Tutorials and lectures: well connected?

Informants were asked for their opinion on whether they had found lectures and tutorials connected up with each other, or not. There was considerable variation in the reactions to this question. It was possible to categorise responses from forty-four of the informants into three groupings of : *well connected, variable* and *very little or no connection.* Out of these forty-four informants, eighteen students stated that lectures and tutorials had been well connected as opposed to nine who said that there had been no or very little connection. Seventeen talked of how they had found the connection between lectures and tutorials variable across subjects. Drawing on my background knowledge of the considerable variations that exist within the Social Sciences faculty in the way in which courses are structured, it seems reasonable to suggest that the division of participant opinion on this matter points to a real difference in practice between courses. The participants' observations are most probably a reliable indication of the variation that exists in practice, with some courses having clear and strong connections between lectures and tutorials and others having only the most tenuous of links between the two forms of teaching.

Views on the connection that should obtain between lectures and tutorials

Being asked to give their opinion on the extent to which they had found tutorials and lectures connected or not prompted very many of the informants to reflect more generally on the relationship between lectures and tutorials and to put forward their own conceptions of the value that could be gained from tutorials for their understanding of a course as a whole.

Before examining the different types of connection that individual students wished to see exist between lectures and tutorials, it is necessary to draw attention to some matters which the students clearly identified as bad teaching practice. A strong dislike was expressed against tutorials which simply replicated the content and one-sided style of delivery of a lecture. In the words of one third year Economic and Social History student (St39), where the tutor gives the lecture "outline in a mini-lecture, that's, that's a

waste of time." A number of informants also voiced considerable discontent with a situation they had encountered where a tutor appeared not to have much, or indeed any, information about what was being covered in the lecture course. For example, a medical student studying fourth year Psychology described how this problem had been particularly acute in certain of the tutorials that she had experienced within the Medical faculty:

> St44 And the tutors never seemed to know what to do with us, especially as some of them didn't know what we were learning in the lectures. So they had no idea of what we were supposed to know [St44 slight laugh] which was even more confusing.

Turning from these comments on what was perceived very clearly as undesirable practice, the following paragraphs will examine the contrasting positions that students took up on the question of the value of connections between lectures and tutorials. For some of the informants it was a matter of great importance that tutorials should be tightly integrated with the lectures and other aspects of the course. The value placed on maintaining a close connection between lectures and tutorials emerges clearly in the following extract from an interview with a third year Accountancy student:

> St22 But undoubtedly the tutorial's got to be linked to the work you do in lectures but – also the reading as well – that makes a good tutorial as well. If you can bring points in, but like eh, what's happening in the real world, reading and what you've done in lectures. And that sort of makes you want to go and do more as well.

This theme of the importance of a strong integration of lecture and tutorial work is also evident in the following extract from another third year Accountancy student. In the case of this particular student, the wish to have close connections between different parts of the course can be seen to be driven, in part at least, by his strategic, exam-oriented approach to studying. In addition, the extract from the interview raises the point that clear, strong links between lectures and tutorials may be perceived as holding greater importance in some subjects than in others.

St24 .. basically, I mean, it's an exam factor at university in many ways, so when you know you've got the exams to sit and you know the exams are going to be based on the questions you've done before and the questions you've done before have been in the tutorials and the tutorials are based on the lectures, it is important that the tutorials and lectures are tight together especially for our subject.

On the topic of a possible variability across subjects in the perception of the value of a close connection between tutorials and lectures, a third year Nursing Studies student made it very clear that she had no overall preference for a tight or loose connection between lectures and tutorials. In her own words:

St4 I think it depends on the subject. Some subjects are good in that they pick out something specific from the course and discuss it; whereas others take something related to the course and discuss it. I think it depends on the subject you're studying whether – not – whether one of these approaches is good or whether it's bad.

In contrast to those informants who wished to see a tight connection between lectures and tutorials, or a degree of connection which varied from subject to subject; certain students had an overall preference for only a very loose, or minimal, connection between what happened in small group teaching and the lectures. The most commonly expressed reason for wishing to see only tenuous links between the lectures and tutorials was a wish to cover more, different, ground in a subject. In other words, there was a desire to extend rather than simply consolidate knowledge. For example a third year Nursing Studies student described how:

St1 In some ways I'd rather tutorials were going a bit sort of farther out just because to give you a bit [of a] move into the subject. I mean it's still picking up on the ends of the subjects that, that you're not covering in the lectures; because if you are doing your lectures the only thing is it's only reiterating it. [slight pause] That gets annoying sometimes.

Another reason for not having too close a connection between lectures and tutorials features in the account presented by a second year Sociology student. She notes the value of gaining a different perspective from that of the lecturer on the material that is being studied.

St12 I like them when they're not too connected with the lecture. You know, they're basically giving the lecturer's point of view all over again; and you feel, Oh, what's the point, I've been to the lecture. I don't need it again.

A fourth year Psychology student argued against a close connection between lectures and tutorials in fourth year on the basis of wishing to achieve a wider and clearer coverage of subject matter: but went on to make an important qualification to this statement, stating the belief that the value of the connection between lectures and tutorials varied across the different years of undergraduate study. In first year staying closer to the lectures – to the subject matter which had been imparted in them – might facilitate discussion. In his own words:

St47 Allowing you to cover more ground and be aware of more ah – so you see, I mean, the lectures follow a particular strand, you can see where that strand lies within the whole field a lot more clearly. Uhm. I think in first year it probably would have helped if they'd been more tied to the lectures because then we would have uhm maybe, well had a bit more knowledge, uh, to start with.

Some students steered a middle course between the two positions of wishing either a very strong or a weak connection between lectures and tutorials; and argued for a 'balanced' connection. For example, a second year Sociology student reasoned that:

St13 .. there's got to be a balance. I don't want sort of tutorials to go over lectures in a very sort of uhm. But on the other hand there sort of, there needs to be some kind of correlation between the two.

In summary, looking at the whole set of responses on this matter, no clear overall picture, or trend in preferences, emerges concerning student opinions on the value of a close or loose connection between lectures and tutorials. Some students argued for a close link between small group work and lectures to give a clearly, tightly focused understanding of course material: while others wished to see only a loose connection which would allow them to gain a wider, and possibly more differentiated, view of a subject. Various intermediate positions between these two poles have also been described. The importance of the actual *discipline,* or *specific subject content,* in determining the value of a tight or loose connection between lectures and

small group discussions featured strongly within some student accounts of this topic.

Distinctive contributions made by tutorials to a course of study

In reflecting on the relationship between tutorials, lectures and other aspects of a course, individual students talked about what they saw as the distinctive contribution that tutorials could make to their understanding of a course as a whole. Student observations on the contribution that tutorials could make to their overall progress on a course can be grouped into six categories: *clarifying points from lectures, usefulness for exam preparation, adding value and examining specific subject content in greater depth, providing a different perspective, adding interest/motivation* and the *possibility to explore problems in understanding.* Interview material related to the first five of these six categories will be examined in the current section of the chapter.

As regards the sixth category, *the possibility to explore problems in understanding,* some students identified this as a distinctive contribution of tutorials to their studies, without me cueing them into discussion of this particular matter. However, the matter of exploring personal problems in understanding a topic in a tutorial was also a central item within my own interview guide: and if the subject was not raised by informants themselves, they were asked if they felt that there had been enough opportunity in tutorials to explore particular problems with course subject matter, or not. The responses that were received to this enquiry proved to be of very great value in illuminating key aspects of social interaction within tutorials. The importance of the responses to this enquiry for the study as a whole dictated that they should be examined in a separate part of the chapter rather than incorporated into the current section on *distinctive contributions made by tutorials to a course of study.*

Clarifying points from lectures

Looking first at the category *clarifying points from lectures*, this was perceived as a key function of tutorials by a fair number of informants, and in particular by first year students. One first year Psychology student, for example, commented on how:

> St50 Well most of the time they're quite a good chance to clear up what you've had in the lectures

Another first year Psychology student made the observation that material presented earlier in lectures could be considered within tutorials at a more appropriate pace:

> St50 You know, it makes it a lot easier sometimes the stuff that's covered in the lectures gone over quite quickly; sometimes you need to sort of go over it a bit more slowly in the tutorial.

Although first year students were more likely to highlight the contribution that tutorials could make to clarifying their understanding of lecture material than students in subsequent years, a few students in their senior years still laid great stress on this function of tutorials. For example, in the following interview extract a third year student gives strong assent to my interpretation of her position on this matter.

> CA So you're suggesting if the tutorial isn't used to clarify - ideas from lecture course then
> St37 Mmm [assent]
> CA it's[not doing its job, its purpose, is that right?
> St37/ / [It's not really doing. Yeah, that's right. Absolutely.

As the quotations which have been presented in the last few paragraphs illustrate, the *value* of tutorials as a forum for refining the understanding of lecture material was a key matter for certain participants in the study. It needs to be noted, however, that when students were commenting directly on the amount of *actual opportunity* that existed within tutorials to clarify points from lectures, opinion was divided. Some students felt that sufficient attention was given to the clarifying of points from lectures, but others felt that insufficient time was devoted to this matter. This division in student

opinion most probably reflects real variability in practice between tutors, in addition to differences between students in the extent that they prefer the extension or consolidation of knowledge.

Students who commented on the lack of an opportunity to clarify points and explore problems from lectures tended to place the responsibility for this omission squarely with the tutor. However, one first year Psychology student made the observation that students themselves may bear at least some responsibility for not taking up the opportunity to examine lecture material within tutorials. Her remarks on this topic ring true to my own observations of certain first year tutorials:

> St52 ... in the Psychology tutorial, when we're asked as, quite often, you know, we were asked is there anything from the lectures that you'd, or how do you feel that the lectures are going. But we don't give up a lot of the time for it, so it's basically ehm. Well I've noticed; and usually the thing that springs to mind usually is not the subject matter, it's usually the method, the method of the lecturer or something that everybody picks up on rather than the subject matter; ehm and - ehm, we don't really seem to go into the actual content of the course really.

Further cautionary notes concerning the extent to which tutorials do serve the function of enabling students to check out their understanding of lecture material and other aspects of a course will be introduced in a subsequent section on *the possibility to explore problems in understanding*. That section will examine the factors which students described as inhibiting their willingness to ask for clarification or explanation of course material.

Usefulness for exam preparation

Quite a number of informants indicated that tutorials were of considerable benefit to the task of preparing for exams. In the words of a third year Economic and Social History student:

> St40 ... and eh, tutorials are very good for, you know, exam questions, I find. That's very important, towards that.

Participants' comments on how tutorials aided the work of preparing for exams can be divided into two types of account. In one type of account, discussion, close examination, of a topic in a tutorial was presented as

leading to a deeper, clearer *understanding* which helped their exam preparation and performance. In the other type of account, participants simply commented that the *content* covered within tutorials was useful in itself for revision purposes. As an example of an account which focused on content per se, a second year Social History student remarked that: "usually it's things that are in tutorials that turn up in exams." (St29). The third year student, quoted earlier on the general benefits of tutorials for revision, noted that:

> St40 it gives you a lot more information from going to a tutorial to put into an exam, the tutorial does help.

Turning to illustrate the type of account which portrayed tutorials as aiding exam preparation by increasing understanding of topics, the following extract from the interview of a second year Sociology student draws a sharp contrast between the surface accumulation of information from lectures as opposed to the understanding of material which could be gained from tutorials:

> St15 Yeah, I find like tutorials it's best that you understand what's going on for your revision terms. When you like, when you do [inaudible word] in tutorials you understand what's going on; so when you come back to it, like in June, you immediately understand it. You can remember it. Because when you look in your lecture notes, you just, you are just taking down what he's saying; and you just think: "what is going on".

Another participant in the study, a woman in her third year studying Nursing and taking Social History as an outside subject, reflected on how the skilful actions of one of her tutors were of value, in themselves and for exam preparation. The participant described how this tutor acted to clarify issues, integrate topics which had arisen in discussion into coherent themes and highlight points of particular significance. The following short extract from the participant's interview indicates the thrust of her argument linking the tutor's good teaching practice with exam preparation:

> St5 ... what I like in Social History this year is that she tie it in and stress the important point. Which really in the same sense I find is a preparation for the exam.

'Adding value' and examining particular subject content in greater depth

The preceding sections have illustrated how some participants in the study emphasised the usefulness of tutorials for clarifying points that arose in the lectures and for preparing themselves well for examinations. In contrast, the account given by certain other students of the connections between tutorials and a course as a whole emphasised the *independent* part that tutorials should play in increasing their knowledge and understanding. Rather than simply seeing tutorials as a means of clarifying or amplifying knowledge presented elsewhere in a course, these students had an expectation that tutorials should make a fresh and worthwhile contribution. For example, in an exchange with me on this topic one student was firmly of the opinion that tutorials should provide "added value". Another student put forward a similar point when she stated that:

> St13 I think it's important that they add something apart from the lecture.

One specific way in which tutorials were seen by some of the informants as adding value to their studies, lay in the opportunity that they presented to examine specific topics in considerable depth and detail. The following quotation from a second year Sociology student gives an endorsement of the worth of analysing particular topics in greater depth, while at the same time recognising practical constraints and limitations.

> St11 ... it gives you a bit of scope to go a bit deeper into a few areas. It's not – I wouldn't say they, they're good for the course as a whole because you haven't really got time to deal with everything; but for a few sort of concentrated areas, they, they're quite good.

Providing a different perspective

A number of participants drew attention during their interviews to another contribution that tutorials could make to their understanding of a subject. They recognised that lecturers might on occasion be providing them with only a single perspective, reading, of a particular topic in a discipline. They went on to point out how a tutor might take a different stance towards this particular topic and give them a contrasting view. This particular function that tutorials may play in introducing a different perspective on the content

of a discipline is captured succinctly in the following quotation from a third year Nursing Studies student:

> St3 It is a different viewpoint as well, and something like Psychology, it's good to get a different viewpoint on a subject, you know.

Tutorials adding interest/ motivation

The interview material that has been presented so far in this section of the chapter has centred on the ways in which tutorials may assist students to gain a better understanding of the content of a course. Aside from these direct intellectual benefits that have been described, some students viewed tutorials as making a valuable affective contribution to their academic study. They saw tutorials as contributing to their interest in a course and enhancing their motivation to study. The impetus to study that tutorials can bring to some students is illustrated in the following extracts from the interview of a second year Social History student. He describes their functions in increasing both understanding and motivation:

> St26 .. when I say they're better, I mean I think the lectures, you need the lectures for to get the information and well obviously, and when you've just done the reading out yourself, copied out, taken pages of notes, it's not very interesting. So like tutorials helps, I don't know, I suppose they liven it up a bit.
> .... and you can sort of clarify anything you're not too sure on. And I suppose it makes you. If you just had. If you didn't have them and you just had, you were told to, you should be reading this, this and this – there's much less of a – an impetus to do it.

The earlier discussion of the importance of informality in relationships with a tutor and the other members of a small group, and the current subject of tutorials as a potential source of motivation for study, both bring to mind the central emphasis that Abercrombie placed on the emotional work associated with learning. This theme of the importance of the affective aspects of study in higher education will be pursued in the final discussion chapter of this thesis.

Exploring personal problems in understanding

Some participants in the study identified *the possibility to explore problems in understanding* as a distinctive contribution which tutorials made to their studies. For example, one second year Sociology student described how: "I like the way you can ask questions, if you've got any doubts about anything." (St11) He then went on to state that: "it gives you a sort of channel; but a fairly vital channel in connection." Similarly, a third year Accountancy student who had been airing his worries to me that increases in tutorial size would have serious effects on the quality of tutor-student interaction and of learning, continued by noting that:

> St24 ... it's – ehm, an opportunity to air problems that you have with the course to someone who you can expect, reasonably expect to get an answer from. If you don't have a tutorial contact problems can build up and it can – if they keep building up it can reach the state where you just – well you haven't simply got the time to clear them out. Ehm, I wouldn't like to see that happening.

Turning, from illustrating the responses of those students who represented the possibility to explore personal problems in understanding as an important function of tutorials, the interviews examined the extent to which this possibility was seen to have been realised in day-to-day practice. Participants were asked if they felt that there had been enough opportunity in tutorials to explore particular problems with course subject matter, or not. Forty seven of the students gave responses to this question which could be categorised. Sixteen felt that there had been enough opportunity given to explore specific problems they might have in understanding a topic, whereas seventeen felt that they had not been given sufficient opportunity. Nine felt that this had varied. Five students did not give a direct reply to the question on whether there had been enough opportunity to explore specific problems, but simply said that they had never done so in a tutorial.

A large proportion of participants then felt that there was not enough of a chance provided to explore particular problems in tutorials themselves. However, it needs to be noted that a considerable number of participants commented that most tutors could be approached privately about a problem outside of the tutorial hour. Some students also indicated that they felt it to

be a more appropriate action to seek assistance from a tutor on an individual basis rather than to raise such matters within a tutorial.

Where it was possible and appropriate, a related question was put to participants on whether they felt that in a tutorial they needed to be guarded or not in raising a problem, in saying that they didn't comprehend something. Responses to this question revealed that a considerable number did feel reluctant in a group setting to admit that they were experiencing a difficulty in understanding some point or topic. The consequences that this lack of willingness to expose problems in understanding can often have is captured sharply in the following extract from an interview with a second year male, Sociology student:

> St11 I mean most of them usually sort of ask if, if there's any problems and most people usually react with a blank, blank look so they just carry on with things.

In my own observations of tutorials it was common for tutors to provide students with an opportunity to raise any problems that they were experiencing with course material; but often this opening to raise problems was not taken up by any member of the group.

The analysis of the whole set of responses to the questions concerning opportunity to explore problems and guardedness about expressing difficulties revealed three central themes in students' accounts of why they felt unwilling or unable in a tutorial to explore personal problems in understanding a topic. These themes were: *self-directed face concerns, concern for the interests of others* and *the perception that exploring problems was not possible within a tutorial.*

Self-directed face concerns

Looking first at *self-directed face concerns,* some students talked in a very open fashion of how they were unwilling to lose face with their peers or with their tutor by raising problems that they were experiencing. For example, one woman in her third year studying Economic and Social History described how:

> St35 I think people generally are quite, ehm, reticent about coming forward with problems they've had. Eh, I think it's [very slight pause] eh, you know. You either feel you are worried that the tutor will think you haven't been doing the work or – you don't want to admit to having problems to other people that you really, ehm, don't understand the concept and eh especially, I think especially in a tutor group where really nobody knows each other.

In the following extract a fourth year Nursing student described her current experiences in a tutorial, for a first year class which she was taking as an outside subject, in very similar terms. She noted the strong effects that face concerns had on action and how these face concerns were heightened within a large group where students were not acquainted with each other.

> St6 in the [X Subject] there nobody ever comes out with a problem, they'll always say is there anything you're having problems with: and he leaves it open, but - I think it - because - it's a big group and nobody really knows each other and there's not the trust there that you know if you say, well actually I'm having real problems with this, that Nigel won't sit and hah, hah, hah, you know and laugh at you and I think that's really humiliating.

In passing, it is interesting to note the form in which many informants discussed the face concerns they felt during tutorials. While this topic was discussed in an open manner within the interviews, the participants often used a form of words and constructions which gave them some protective distance from these concerns or 'naturalised' these concerns, presented them as a normal feature of social life. For example, within a turn of speaking on this topic participants might move from a first person account to talk about the subject in the more distant, 'objective' voice of the third person – "they feel ...". The forms of expression used to 'naturalise' these feelings are exemplified in the following quotation from a third year male student studying Accountancy:

St22 I think it's probably just human nature like that you don't want to be made a fool of in front of your mates.

In discussing the topic of feeling guarded within tutorials, a mature Social and Economic History student brought out clearly the *cumulative* inhibiting effects on communication about problems in understanding of the beliefs associated with the face concerns of individual students. This woman commented on how all of the students in a group may be reluctant to raise a problem because of the false belief that they alone may be experiencing a difficulty with this particular topic – a belief which ties them up in a communication knot.

St29 Aye, that's it. And eh I think, like to think oh well, he must know it, he's not asking so he must know it and it goes all the way round that. [St29 slight laugh]

Another student, who talked of how she would tend to be guarded in raising any problem in understanding, described her feeling of satisfaction when the assumption that she was the only person experiencing problems in understanding was shattered.

St12 ..actually when you're sitting in classes and somebody else says something that you didn't - when somebody else says the thing that you didn't understand, you think, you know, it's not just me. I like it when that happens quite a lot. Do get the feeling.

A few students revealed in their interviews how their general face concerns within tutorials, (and their particular difficulties in raising any problem in understanding which they faced), made sense when viewed within their whole history of learning. They described how their actions in tutorials were influenced by inhibiting perceptions of themselves derived from the past. For example, in the following long quotation a quite lively, outgoing second year Sociology student provided her own 'historical' explanation of why and how she feels inhibited in academic settings where her performance may be evaluated by others:

St12 Oh, it tends to be occasionally; but when I don't understand something I tend to feel like I'd rather sit there and let everybody else talk about it; and like try and understand from them rather than ask questions 'cause like, ehm, I don't know in my family. I think it's in my family my two sisters are extremely clever ..... that she's went through school without doing any work and came out with six A-level band Highers, you know. .....You know, it was kind of, both my sisters, my other sister 's just got accepted to Cambridge, you know; and my dad went to Cambridge so like everybody in my family is really clever. So when I don't - I'm always the one at home who's left feeling stupid. So when I am here I keep thinking maybe, maybe it's not because it's difficult to understand, it's maybe because I'm stupid and I don't like anybody thinking I'm stupid. So I. I'd rather sit up - sit down and like try and work it out by myself rather than.

Moving on to examine the factors which students identified as leading to variability across tutorials in their face concerns and willingness to raise personal problems in understanding a topic, key matters identified in many accounts were differences in:

- the formality or informality of the group atmosphere,
- how approachable tutors appeared to be,
- the size of the tutorial group,
- and levels of confidence between first and fourth year students.

Earlier sections of the chapter have detailed the way in which most of these separate factors facilitate or inhibit participation in general, not only the expression of personal problems. Another possible determinant of willingness to explore personal problems in understanding within a tutorial was raised by two of the informants. They described how they felt more at ease in coming out with a problem to a tutor who had a lower status in the academic hierarchy than to a member of staff in a senior position. In the words of one of these two women, a second year Sociology student:

St12 .... you know, you feel more able to tell someone that you don't understand something if they're not so important.

The inhibiting effects of the social distance between students and staff occupying a senior position in the academic hierarchy (and concomitantly being much older) also very much occupied one of the staff informants. His reflections on this topic are presented in Chapter 7.

Altruistic reasons for being reluctant to raise difficulties were expressed in quite a number of interviews. For example, a second year female student studying Social History and Politics talked of how:

> St27 I don't see there's anything wrong if people who do perhaps want to bring up something they don't understand in a tutorial, eh but I sort of think, "Oh hec, I don't want to waste other people's time".

A similar view is evident in the following quotation from a first year male English Literature, Social History and Sociology student, whose words have been cited earlier in the chapter. For this student it was a crucial matter that tutorials should stay centrally focused on discussion rather than fulfil other functions. He believed that personal problems in understanding were a "private" matter which should not obtrude on, take up, public space.

> St31 ... if you have a problem like that then I think it's better to see someone privately, so you can get it sorted out yourself. You can have your own conversation as long as it takes, uhm, and you're not holding up other people. Ehm, I think that, you know, I'd feel selfish if I did that in a tutorial. Ehm - [very slight pause] I think, I think they should be made eh for discussion, for people to ehm become, eh, more confident perhaps, uhm.

In the accounts that a few students gave of their thoughts on the matter of raising problems within a tutorial both the themes of *self-directed face concerns* and *concern for the interests of others* were present, as is revealed by the following extract from an interview with a woman in her third year studying Economic and Social History:

> St38 Well it's not that I feel guarded, it's just that, well I do feel a bit guarded but I also feel that ehm, that it's an awful waste of time for the rest of the group because if, if I've got a problem then I don't think anyone else will want to hear about it.
> CA So not seeing that as the purpose of - ?
> St38 No.
> CA of the group?
> St38 No, it's not the purpose of the actual discussion, I don't think.

Exploring problems was not possible within a tutorial

Some informants indicated that they did not customarily raise difficulties they were experiencing, not primarily as a result of *self-directed face concerns* or *concern for the interests of others*, but simply because, on their view, it was *not possible* to do so within a tutorial. For example, a third year Nursing Studies student saw tutorials as being generally very tightly focused on the topic of discussion, with little space left to deal with other concerns:

> St3 Sometimes you get quite an open discussion where you can bring forward any problems but generally you decide from one week to the next what you're going to discuss and that seems to be quite rigid.

In a similar vein, an Accountancy student noted how the focus on particular questions in problem-solving classes meant that there was not space for an exploration of problems in understanding, including problems that were associated with the lectures.

In addition to these comments which noted how some tutorials were almost exclusively concerned with one particular type of activity, a number of informants simply stated that the press of business to be covered in under an hour did not allow individuals the time to raise and then resolve difficulties in understanding. Some of the student comments on this matter revealed an appreciation of the difficulties that tutors experienced in trying to cover a number of different tasks within an hour. For example, a third year Accountancy student recognised that:

> St21 It is very hard for them [tutors] really to sort of squeeze it all into an hour.

Given the difficulty of raising personal problems in understanding within a busy hour, one student suggested that it would be better if tutorials were explicitly structured to allow time for this particular activity, so that students with difficulties would not end up "feeling that you're trespassing on people's time" (St11). In his own words:

> St11 ... if there was a sort of more informal five or ten minutes then it could – I think it would be better.

The preceding pages have examined a number of different aspects of students' accounts of exploring personal problems in understanding within tutorials. In these pages the term 'problem in understanding' has been treated as a quite unproblematic matter, as an unexceptional part of the discourse of learning and teaching. However, the exchange between a student and myself which will be analysed in the next few paragraphs suggests that there may well be a need to reflect on and to unpick its meaning. A large part of this exchange between myself and an articulate, academically able second year student has been reproduced within Chapter 4. To recap, this informant commented in the following terms on the impasse that students in the early part of their academic career may encounter in resolving difficulties in understanding the content of their courses.

> St13 I think some are guarded but I think on the whole the main problem is they, they don't really know what, what problems to ask about.

and

> St13 It's all very well saying to people sort of ask whatever questions you want but very often when you come to university, you don't know what questions you want to ask. So there'll be some embarrassed silence and somebody'd, say, ask when the next exams were. But that wasn't the information that we really needed to know.

A lack of subject knowledge, of an understanding of the standards that will be used to judge their academic work, or of familiarity with the forms of academic discourse could all singly or, (more likely), in combination have produced the state of affairs which has been described in the preceding quotation. As I went on to discuss this comment with her, in a very 'interactive' fashion, it was established that she was directing attention to the need in the early part of one's academic career to have assistance from a tutor in shaping a problem. It was her belief that such assistance from a tutor would be needed less by the time a student had reached second year. Her statement can be read as pointing up the distinction between knowing that you are experiencing a difficulty and knowing what the nature of that difficulty is. A novice may well need assistance in constructing a more clearly formulated problem. Later in the interview, the student confirmed that this was indeed the distinction that she was seeking to draw.

In her view, the opportunity to explore problems within a tutorial was also very heavily determined by the quality of the social relationship between tutor and students. In her own words, during the interview:

> CA I mean. Well, one thrust I'm taking from what you're saying there is you feel there's not a sufficient opportunity to explore particular problems. (St13: Mmh [confirmatory]) Is that right?
> St13 Yeah. But it's hard as well to talk generally because again so much of it depends on the tutor's personality.
> CA Sure. I take that on board. (St13: Mmh) You feel that, that aspect as well as others has varied (St13: Mmh [confirmatory]) a lot from tutorial to tutorial.
> St13 I mean, I think there are a lot of sort of structural changes you can make. I've sort of being suggesting one or two, but so much of it just gets down to the personality. Uhm. [slight pause] And that - I don't know I think maybe the good tutors seem to have an instinctive understanding of groups. Ehm, the way to relax them, the way to get information out of them.

Pursuing the insight that comes from this student a step further, a distinctly defined 'problem in understanding' can be seen as inseparable from its clear articulation *within* an established body of knowledge and the forms of discourse appropriate to this particular body of knowledge. At the same time, when student difficulties are being explored in a group setting it may be necessary to establish a good, "relaxing" quality of social relationships for this process of problem articulation to take place. The dialogue between this particular student and myself also highlights the fact that tutors may require to be more pro-active in assisting learners who are novices in a discipline. The Discussion chapter will return to this particular point when the need for some reformulation of Abercrombie's position on the role and responsibilities of the tutor is being considered.

Tutorials and tutors as a source of advice on methods of studying

General aspects of advice

A central theme running through the current thesis is that in everyday practice tutorials can and do serve a number of functions, aside from stimulating discussion of a particular academic topic. For example, tutorials may be used to provide students with some direct general instruction on how to go about studying at university and with more specific advice which enables students to develop a *detailed* sense of how to go about learning within a particular discipline. Some tutors may also indicate to a tutorial group their willingness to provide advice and consultation on a one-to-one basis outside of the tutorials themselves. It appeared to be an important research objective to investigate the extent to which student participants perceived that the handing over of advice on studying had been realised in tutorials. Informants, therefore, were asked for their opinion on the extent to which advice had been provided on studying within tutorials; and encouraged to indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the advice that had been provided and to give their general reflections on tutorials as a forum for the provision of study advice.

In reporting participants' accounts of the advice that they had received, or failed to receive; it seemed appropriate to analyse and present talk concerning *essay writing, exams* and *reading* separately rather than to attempt a synthesis of comments on the advice given on these different areas of studying. A number of considerations influenced this particular analytical and reporting decision. A principal consideration was the wish to provide a fine-grained picture of student reactions to the advice which they had received from tutors on studying – a picture which could later be used to guide staff development, tutor training. As the following sections will show, student satisfactions and dissatisfactions varied somewhat across the different areas of essay writing, exams and reading; and advice on essay-writing was a much more salient matter for most students. Accordingly it would be very difficult to present a coherent general account of student perceptions of advice which gave a valid representation of student opinion.

Making expectations explicit

One general theme did emerge, however, from the comments that students provided on advice concerning essay-writing, exams and reading. Some informants strongly asserted that it was important for tutors *to make explicit their expectations* concerning the purposes and the processes that students ought to be pursuing in studying at university. Other informants drew attention to the need for an explicit account of the criteria that are used to judge understanding within a particular discipline. Among other matters, this theme is illustrated clearly in the following section which examines in some depth students' thoughts concerning the advice that they had received on *essay writing.*

Advice on essay writing

In commenting on the advice that they had received on studying, the participants focused their attention much more on essay-writing than on exams and reading. This concentration of attention on essay-writing probably reflects the fact that the academic work of Social Science students centres for much of the year around the production of essays. Responses from thirty-seven of the participants could be categorised according to the quantity of advice which they indicated that they had received on essay-writing. Thirteen students stated that advice had been given on this topic and almost all of them were satisfied with the guidance that they had been given. Five participants remarked on how the assistance and information given on this matter had varied between departments. Thirteen students made negative comments on the guidance that had been given on this aspect of studying, stating either that no, or not enough, advice had been given on writing essays. Six students stated that advice on essay-writing could be sought outside of the tutorial itself, but did not identify tutorials themselves as an arena where advice was volunteered.

Turning to look at the actions that participants reported were taken in tutorials to enhance their essay writing skills, most of those who had received assistance in this area simply noted that the group had received direct instruction and advice from the tutor. Some participants, however, drew attention to activities that they had been given to develop their essay

writing practice such as commenting (anonymously) within a tutorial on parts of each others' essays, looking at essays written by students in previous years which were models of good practice, etc. A particularly salient feature of the accounts that participants gave of the advice which they had received, or failed to get, on essay-writing was the importance of gaining a precise statement from tutors of their own *expectations* of what students should be attempting to achieve in an essay. For example, a first year Psychology student singled out for particular appreciation his tutor's clear communication of the conventions of writing in higher education and the need to write a particular (analytical) style of essay in this new context:

> St50 She sort of brought us views too. Just basically writing sort of slightly different style essays to what we've been doing before. But she had to make it quite clear to us that she wasn't going to help us sort of reproduce school type essays. I think it went quite well.

The words of another first year Psychology student drew attention to the importance of the *manner* in which tutors communicate the practice that they expect students to follow in essay-writing. The need for reassurance at the beginning of one's university career and the encouragement of feelings of competence figure largely in the following extract from her interview:

> St52 ... and I remember, ehm, it was a really nice comment, it's a really nice way to look at an essay which relieves my stress about doing an essay I must say because, ehm, I remember [Tutor X] said, ehm, something like basically a Psychology essay is just to show us that you know something about Psychology. And she was 'n eh – when she was explaining what she was, what they were looking for, it was quite, she put it in a nice way. I think that helped quite a bit, if not with the content just for my feelings.

Other participants pointed up the need, not only for general advice on essay-writing, but to get a clear sense of the specific requirements, expectations of individual departments. The following quotation from a second year Sociology student comments favourably on the actions of a Social Anthropology tutor who had given a very clear account of that department's requirements. Her second statement then describes the difficulties which may be experienced in tailoring one's essay-writing to the demands of different disciplines.

St 13 ... the tutor went through sort of, ehm, her approach to an essay and within that sort of showed us what the department were looking for.
CA So making clear the department's expectations.
St13 Mmh. Because particularly in social sciences – something like Sociology there's quite a set format to essay writing and structure, which is quite different for me coming from an Arts background. It took a while to acquire.

Moving on to look at expressed dissatisfactions with the advice that had been provided on essay-writing, discontent usually simply centred on quantity – that advice had not been provided on their particular courses, or had been insufficient. A more specific complaint raised by a few participants concerned tutors failing to communicate clearly their expectations concerning essay-writing. Two of the participants in the study who indicated that they had received advice on essay-writing in first year, drew attention to a simple but serious problem with the guidance that they had received. Advice had been provided out of sequence with the task of writing a first essay. One of the two participants, a third year Accountancy student talked of how:

St17 Eh, in your first year courses, they all – after you've done your first essay, they all give you guidance on how to write a better one. It's a bit strange, you'd think they'd tell you how to write the first essay well.

The woman in her second year studying Sociology whose words were quoted at the top of this page was achieving good marks in her essays. However, she expressed her dissatisfaction when tutors were unwilling to give individual students guidance on essay-writing. She described her experiences in first year where:

St13 I had a couple of tutors last year who just almost refused to help because they said it would give you an unfair advantage if they went over an essay which, I mean it wasn't very encouraging because sometimes you just needed a bit of advice and direction.

To conclude this section on essay advice, it seemed appropriate to present a short extract from the interview of a third year Economic and Social History student. She points up the need for students themselves to take responsibility and act on the advice that they receive. By drawing attention to the variation between students in the way that they go about essay-

writing, the issue of how best to give advice which takes account of individual differences in styles of studying comes into focus. This student's thoughts point to the dangers of giving students a strongly prescriptive, 'ideal type' account of how one ought to write essays.

> St35 The problem is that they give out advice and I don't know how many people actually follow it. .... The advice they give is good. But I don't think it's always, always taken. You know it maybe be helpful if it was. Ehm, but also I think people have very different ways of working. Ehm and so nec-, advice is not necessarily the best [inaudible word] people. Especially by saying, you know, found their own ways of doing essays and, and working through tutorials.

Advice on reading

Moving on to look at perceptions of the advice that was given by tutors on reading for a course as a whole and methods of approaching academic reading, there was again a clear division of opinion. There were fewer student comments on reading than existed on essay-writing. Of the twenty comments on this matter that could be categorised in a clear fashion, nine students felt that enough advice had been given on reading as opposed to seven who felt that there was not enough advice given. One student commented on how practice was variable across topics. Three students pointed out that although advice on reading might not be volunteered within tutorials themselves, tutors could be approached individually for assistance.

It is important to note that the nine students who declared themselves satisfied with the assistance and information given in tutorials on reading, focused their comments almost exclusively on the *content* of the reading that had to be achieved for a course. They felt that adequate guidance had been given on what they should be reading. However, explicit mention was not made of any general, or discipline specific, advice being given on *how to* go about reading academic texts.

The comments of some of the students who were dissatisfied with the advice that had been given concerning reading drew attention to a lack of sufficient guidance on how to go about reading at university. A third year Nursing Studies student, for example, described how students learned to read academic texts as they progressed in their academic career but felt that a

much better induction to the practices of academic reading could be given to first year students. In her own words: "you're not actually told how to read things properly, I don't think." (St4). She went on to note the need for assistance with the novel challenge of reading and note-taking practices, remarking on how:

> St4 Basically how to read, how to read, how to scan things, and eh critically and eh – ehm even taking notes. I'd say that was quite a new concept, I think.

Turning to consider a specific difficulty which can arise in the early stages of reading within a discipline, a few students pointed out the need for guidance from tutors on what their priorities should be in tackling the reading for a course. It was felt that more pointers could be given on matters such as what to read, how to select articles and whether or not it was appropriate to spend a great deal of time struggling to make sense of particular pieces of text. Viewed from the students' perspective, these seem to be reasonable demands given that it may be necessary to do a great deal of careful reading before you can establish what are important issues and which topics are more tangential to current debate within a discipline.

Advice on exams

Looking last at student statements concerning the advice they had received from tutorials on exam format, techniques and examiners' expectations, there were classifiable responses from twenty-three participants. Eight students stated that advice had not been given, with some of them also making the specific complaint that they had not been given a clear sense of examiners' expectations. Eleven students indicated that advice had been given on exams and some gave a fairly detailed picture of specific advice that they had received in particular tutorials. One student noted that practice had been variable; and three said that advice was not volunteered on this topic, but that there was an opportunity to seek advice and they themselves were willing to ask.

Those students who indicated that advice had been given on this matter, detailed a number of different actions which tutors had taken to prepare them for examinations, such as giving: indications of the content of an

examination, advice on revision techniques, an opportunity within tutorials to practise exam questions, etc. For those students who said that not enough advice had been given, the lack of a sufficiently clear sense of examiners' expectations emerged as a particularly salient issue. As the third year Nursing Studies student, quoted in the preceding section of the chapter, remarked:

> S4 I think to know then what exactly the examiners were looking for would have been quite useful.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that one of the students who felt that advice had not been given on exams and exam revision was not at all unhappy about this state of affairs. In his own words:

> St17 I don't think I've, eh, missed out on anything by not doing exam revision [in tutorials]. Eh there's maybe too much emphasis on trying to pass exams as it is.
> CA So you wouldn't want it skewed any more to that?
> St17 I don't think so. No.

His view that it is wrong to focus too much attention on examinations, stands in marked contrast to the position taken by, an admittedly very few, participants in the study who could be clearly identified from their interviews as 'cue-seekers'. These cue-seeking students were very willing to ask about exams. One of them, a fourth year Nursing Studies student, for example, remarked on how: "it's the one thing that people will speak up about, exams." (St7). For these students, seeking information and advice from tutors concerning exams was regarded as an important and legitimate activity.

Coda

The topic of the advice that is given in tutorials on studying at university is not one that, to the best of my knowledge, has been considered in previous research on small-group teaching. As Chapter 2 has indicated, research on small-group work in higher education has concentrated on questions related to the processes involved in discussion and small group dynamics or on factors within individuals which predispose them to take either a large or a

small part within tutorials. The current study has looked at other purposes that may be achieved in tutorials, in addition to the facilitation of discussion. Part IV of this chapter has attempted to present a wider view of tutorials, looking at how participants talked about the connections between tutorials and other parts of a course. Some of the principal themes that have featured in this fourth part of the chapter will be addressed further in the Discussion at the end of the thesis which will highlight the importance of viewing tutorials within the context of the whole learning and teaching system of which they form a part.

Chapter 7

The Tutors' Perspective

Introduction

This chapter looks at tutorials from the perspective of the ten expert practitioners who took part in the study. It begins by examining the set of interconnected features which they identified as constituting a good tutorial and key elements in their definition of the role of a tutor. Attention then moves to the task that tutors faced in creating a safe environment. It is shown that all of the tutors placed great emphasis on establishing a group climate where students could feel safe to debate topics and to explore difficulties in understanding the content of a course. Tensions that may exist between acting to achieve a safe environment and the pursuit of teaching goals are discussed in this section of the chapter. The next section of the chapter looks at tutors' descriptions of the differences that they found in leading groups of first year students in contrast to groups of students in their third and fourth year.

The following two sections of the chapter consider tutors' reactions to the questions of whether or not:

- students should be assessed on their performance within tutorials,
- more attention might be given within tutorials to the matter of assisting students to gain communication skills.

Reactions to these questions brought into view certain of the values and aims which actuated the tutors' everyday practice.

The final part of the chapter looks at certain of the constraints on achieving their goals identified by the tutors and at the undesirable effects of an increase in the size of tutorial groups. In addition, it highlights certain student perceptions that staff recognised could create distance and difficulties in communication.

Being a good tutor

There was a very large degree of consensus on what made for a good tutorial experience. Later sections of this chapter will detail some of the differences in purposes that existed between individual tutors. However, it is appropriate to claim that, in broad outline at least, they all shared a common construction of what made for a good, and satisfying, tutorial and of certain basic duties of the tutor.

Tutors agreed in identifying a number of features which were seen as defining a good, satisfying tutorial. At the core of this cluster of features were: lively engaged interaction, intellectual stimulation and evidence of students' progress in understanding. The following quotation from Tutor G, presenting her idea of "a good tutorial", encapsulates these three closely linked themes:

> I mean I think the main thing is, is the involvement. And actually some sort of feeling that the students are actually grappling with the material, rather than just passively taking it in – are actually thinking about the issues beyond what they may have done in the lectures .. and questioning.

A similar mix of features is evident in the following quotation from Tutor A. The quotation highlights the pleasure that she and other tutors reported experiencing when they could see students moving beyond the basics, developing new constructions of a topic:

> My idea of a good tutorial is one that actually stretches and stimulates me as much as it stretches and stimulates the students. Eh, where I, when I actually see them get stuck, ehm, and I actually see them make connections with things that they haven't previously done. Ehm. [slight pause] So that's my idea of a good one. And one that's fairly relaxed ...

Preferably also this lively interaction should demonstrate clear evidence of students taking the initiative in the discussion and of students debating points with each other, not just with the tutor. In the words of Tutor F: "People participating and looking as if they want to be there and exchange among the students themselves. Eh. Initiative coming from the students." For some tutors signs of the students themselves being supportive to, and

enhancing, each others' understanding, ranked as an important matter. For example, Tutor H stated that:

> And, I think, you get so much satisfaction out of the others in the group, the other students in the group being able to answer [a peer's question], because that way you might actually be able to build up some kind of links and relationships. ... And somehow trying to encourage them to support each other and learn from each other as well.

In a similar vein, a number of tutors stressed the importance of creating a spirit of co-operation and avoiding a competitive, individualistic view of the endeavour. Here is Tutor B talking of her satisfaction :

> ... when there is an obvious sharing of knowledge. For I have experience of tutorials where students almost protect their knowledge. It's that one-upmanship, this type of thing and I wouldn't like that. The sharing of knowledge would satisfy me much more.

Looking back over her career as a tutor, Tutor I identified what she described as a "major change" in students' perceptions of the purposes of tutorials. She believed that at present students show "much less reluctance to share knowledge" than had been the case in the past. She also welcomed the fact that:

> ... they don't see them quite as much as, as areas for competition, it's more collaboration. And again that might be because we're presenting it to them differently.

Changing perspective from the description of the features of a good tutorial to how tutors conceived of their own role, there was a consensus among the participants that they should act to ensure engaged participation by the students and set distinct limits on their own contributions to the discussion. There was also agreement on the central importance of the *manner* in which they interacted with students, that they should avoid being too directive or acting in an overbearing manner towards students.

The idea that the role of the good tutor involves imposing strict limits on your own contributions emerges in a striking fashion in the following quotation from Tutor E, where she comments on the importance of not being

misled by apparent student satisfaction into taking on a large share of the interaction in tutorials:

> They may be quite happy [laughing -->] when I've talked too much. So also you have to be very careful that you don't feel rewarded because you shouldn't feel rewarded.

Feelings of dissatisfaction with their performance as tutors largely centred on the concerns that they had failed in their duty to ensure engaged participation by students, or had taken too directive an approach, or at least too prominent a part. Here is Tutor H on the theme of his dissatisfaction when he takes what he sees as too large a part in the proceedings:

> I think one that I dislike is that you – invariably, eh, feel that you come out of a tutorial and you feel as though you've spoken too much: and that in fact you've not had a tutorial which has really been – possibly as helpful as it could be for students.

Tutor A makes her idea of what constitutes a bad tutorial performance very clear in the following quotation:

> My idea of a bad tutorial. Ah – is one where I feel very autocratic, where I feel as if I am the person that is directing it totally; and that it's [sighs] – a bit like banging my head against a brick wall. Uhm, the only ones that have basically ever happened like that have been the first years. And I suspect that's when I'm sort of intimidating them a bit.

Most of the tutors' talk on lack of student participation did not explicitly present the quantity and quality of the tutorial interaction as a joint responsibility of staff and students, where problems might arise from 'failures' on the part of either staff or students. Tutor G, however, did recognise that the best efforts of a tutor may be frustrated if the students themselves don't take the responsibility to prepare and participate. After remarking that "it's great when they participate", she continued to describe how:

> I think that the dislikes are really just the, the negative side of that, that it's – when they sit there ... look blank and wait for you to say something. Yeah, non-participation or, I suppose, non-co-operation if they haven't actually, have done anything to prepare for it.

and

> ... a good tutorial is much more satisfying than a good lecture because you have had the interaction with them. On the other hand, I think, probably a good tutorial is harder to achieve than a good lecture, as well, because there is so much that isn't directly under your control.

While most of this group of members of staff defined their 'facilitative' role by detailing the negative features that they wished to avoid of being dominant or over-talkative, a few positively stressed the importance of acting as a 'facilitator'. Tutor I described how: "I do say to them right at the beginning that I'm a facilitator and that what happens within the group is for them to decide." It was clear from my observations of her tutorials that she did indeed act in a genuinely facilitative manner. She carefully disciplined and limited her own interventions; and in a very friendly fashion encouraged a high level of student participation. The interviews conducted with students who had taken part in her tutorials revealed that they did indeed feel that they had a 'voice' within that particular group. From my own and the students' perspective, she did act as a "facilitator". However, she also seemed to be pursuing other important goals which potentially at least might conflict with the intention of simply facilitating students' own purposes in tutorials. Very shortly after making the statement about telling students that she was a facilitator, Tutor I described the importance she placed on preparing herself well for a tutorial. While on this subject of preparation, she noted that:

> ... but I, I find it hard, eh, to go into a tutorial, even if it's something that I've tutored before without having had time to think about, eh, the overall structure and, and where I would like them to get to in the discussion. Sometimes it takes off at a complete tangent and that's fine, and it's not uncomfortable because you see where it's going, and you can sort of think of ways to pull them back in so that, you know, they'd get an exam question on it they would be able to answer it: and sometimes you actually just let go completely because they're able to see, oh, it's even more interesting and that's OK too ...

The competition between specific teaching aims and the general wish to be responsive to the students' own purposes and directions is, I believe, very evident in this passage. The aims of not talking too much and not being too directive may be difficult wholly to achieve in practice when they come into conflict with other legitimate teaching purposes. Chapter 6 has revealed how students' sometimes limited knowledge base on a topic may set constraints on the extent to which tutors are able to adopt a more 'hands-off' approach. Staying focused on tutors' own accounts of their actions and purposes, Tutor H's dissatisfaction when he had too much to say in tutorials has already been noted. As he talked through this matter, it is possible to feel his unease at being unable to live up to the ideal of the non-directive, facilitative tutor and his sense that putting this ideal into practice was a problematic business:

> I think I ask a lot of questions of people, sometimes, quite often, directly; and I'm not really sure that's the best way. Eh, yet in attempting to try and allow the tutorial to be structured more by the students. Ah, I don't think that works either. ° I'm not really sure. ° [° ° softly] So I get, I get sort of a little bit frustrated. I know what I'd like to see in general terms: and I also know what I do isn't going to meet that objective, I don't think. So I find that a bit frustrating.

Turning to focus on the feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction associated with tutoring, the interview extracts presented on the last few pages have given a sense of the emotional satisfaction that came from playing the role of tutor successfully and bringing about engaged, stimulating debate and progress in understanding. The strong dissatisfactions that arose from failing to act in what was perceived to be an appropriate way have also been detailed. Besides these feelings of pleasure, or discontent, that were closely tied to the performance of their tutoring role, some tutors described how tutorials provided what might be termed important 'personal' sources of satisfaction. They highlighted the interest that came from personal contact with the students and from gaining a sense of how students were engaging with their subject. This can be seen as one of the themes, for example, in the following quotation from Tutor G:

> Well, I suppose, the most obvious like is that it's actually getting the chance to get to know the students a bit better than standing in a lecture: and to actually get them, get them involved and get there a feel for what they're actually understanding about the subject.

Tutor J talked of the sense of satisfaction that came along with enjoyable, successful social interaction:

> Well I'm bound to say that, you know, things that cause one satisfaction are not necessarily to do with good teaching. [laughs] I mean, if you have them rolling with laughter or sort of, you know, if it's a kind of jolly experience then that's one level of – a satisfactory kind of thing.
> ..... so much of it, because it is interacting personally with people, a lot of it is, I suppose the social event: and whether or not the social event worked as a social, as a comfortable, enjoyable social event.

It is interesting to compare these last two quotations with the student views presented in Chapter 6 on the importance of tutors demonstrating a *personal* interest in them.

Creating a safe environment

A theme which ran across all of the accounts was the need to create a climate where students could feel safe to debate and to explore problems that they were experiencing in understanding a subject. There was a clear recognition on the part of all of the tutors that taking part in discussion, and in particular the giving of seminar papers, was anxiety provoking for a considerable number of students; and that this anxiety had to be mitigated by the provision of a climate of 'safety'. Students had to feel that taking an active part in discussion would not expose them to any considerable threat of losing face.

Quite a number of the tutors highlighted the importance of focusing attention within the first few tutorials on the task of creating a good, secure atmosphere. Here, for example, is Tutor A on the central value that she gives to fostering a particular quality of group interaction in the initial tutorials:

> I feel that if the students perceive that you are interested and you care and you're safe, then – not that your skills have to be any the less – but it's actually then the whole thing becomes much easier. You can be highly skilled and not have that atmosphere and it would break down. So to me that creation of contact of learning, or trust, or whatever, is, is the thing that one spends time on to begin with.

Some tutors talked of how they gave an explicit indication to students of their intention to provide a safe, supportive atmosphere. For example, Tutor C described how he communicated to students at the beginning of a first year tutorial that he would "absolutely guarantee" that:

> ... the students would be encouraged to speak in the tutorial without fear of being ridiculed by me or by other members of the tutorial. They'd be completely protected, particularly the beginning tutorials. And I said that I took that as a matter of absolute centrality that students would never, ever, be embarrassed, made to feel embarrassed by anything they said. That was part of the contract; and their part of the contract was that they would jolly well turn up having read the 30, the 30 pages.

In addition to contracting to perform a particular 'protective' role himself, the tutor can also be seen to be setting out to the students his expectations of the manner in which they would engage their peers in debate. A set of 'moral' guidelines governing how they should treat each other has been laid down.

A matter which was seen by some tutors as of key importance was the possibility that some students might hold perceptions of the tutor's purposes that would lead them to feel threatened and less willing to participate in discussion. Tutor E expresses this concern succinctly:

> ... we would concentrate on the subject matter and I think – the **barrier** sometimes is that the students think that I am interested in how clever they are; the sort of basic value of what they are saying. And I am no more interested in that in a sense than their peers are – that I am interested in keeping the thing going and them demonstrating an **interest.**
> CA So making that explicit.
> TutorE Yes, not an expertise as it were and that it's, that the whole idea of evaluation, or assessment, or fear is not, is not at issue.

At another place in the interview she commented that: "I try to remove it, the whole venture from the sort of personal evaluation". A later section of this chapter will return to explore the tutors' perceptions of the possible effects of assessment on student performance; and the comments reported in this later section underline the high value given by the tutors to creating an atmosphere of safety where "personal evaluation" need not be a salient issue for students.

In any group, or society, where there is an attempt to run its affairs on liberal, democratic lines, the dilemma, which is sometimes termed the 'liberal paradox' will have to be faced at some time or other. How, in a group which is committed to ideals of tolerance and 'fair' participation, does one deal with those who are being intolerant, unfair or exploitative without compromising one's ideals to any very significant degree? To pursue their general aim of creating a safe environment tutors may find themselves on occasion needing to act with some firmness to deal with individual students who are threatening the safety, or the learning purposes, of the group. After talking about how he attempted to establish a secure, open group atmosphere, Tutor C went on to recount how:

> So [if] I have to be a bit more directive [laughs] than I'd like to be, I think it's generally taken in good spirit. But I'll shut a student up – if that is what you are asking. If a student is, is dominating and this has the effect of discouraging other students or steering the discussion in really inappropriate directions – unhelpful directions ... then I'll moderate and, and usually be able to do it without hurting the person – mortally.

Limits may then need to be placed on individual students, and direct, potentially threatening, actions taken against 'dominant' members of the group to protect the ideal of safe and free participation. Ideally, however, this act of control will be done without inflicting hurt on the erring individual, without departing too far from the value of ensuring that individual students do not 'lose face' during a tutorial.

Another paradox identified from my reading of the transcripts was that the need to provide a climate of safety was heightened in part by the fact that some of the actions which, even highly-skilled, tutors take are potentially very face-threatening. Tutors saw themselves as having an active role in providing intellectual challenge and in helping students to construct new understandings of a subject – activities which run the risk of students exposing, a possibly embarrassing, lack of comprehension. On my reading of the transcripts, a distinct tension can be seen at places in some of the tutors' accounts between the aim of challenging or 'repairing' students' understanding and the aim of ensuring that students did not lose face. The

following lively exchange between Tutor A and myself, with its vivid images, illustrates well this tension between competing purposes:

> TutorA I think one has to have sort of intellectual rigour and, and poke students from time to time, but I mean I don't think you should sort of – you know, pin them to a, you know a slide. [laughs] .... I'm not really into sort of destroying them, you know, they are, they are –
> CA So a balance between getting them to argue better and what they can cope with personally.
> TutorA Yeah, because I know, I know myself that if I'm in that situation and someone's been like that, I just don't say a word. Because I mean, nobody wants to be dissected ...

A sensitivity to the feelings of threat that may be experienced by students when their arguments are under scrutiny can be seen in this case to set limits on the extent to which intellectual points will be pursued. Tutor H similarly indicated that the pursuit of a line of questioning needed to be tempered by a consideration for students' feelings. Discussing some features of the style of his tutorials, I remarked that his use of "devil's advocate questions" "seemed to work quite well". In response he commented that:

> I try to, what I think I try to do is never set a student up to pursue [a line of argument] that eventually will be embarrassing to them, or will be proven to be wrong, or proven to be unpopular. I think I would pursue that myself.

Problem-solving small group classes, where there is of necessity a fine-grained analysis of students' understanding of technical concepts and procedures, involve a particularly high degree of risk to a student's public face of competence. A tutor who took quite a number of classes of this type was very much exercised over this question of how to deal with a situation where students might experience feelings of threat at having their "misunderstandings" exposed. Here is one of the passages where he is reflecting on this matter:

> ... if you're going to drag somebody .. through this business of, of exposing their misunderstandings to you and perhaps to a group of, a small group of students that they happen to find themselves cloistered with, they haven't chosen these people, they haven't chosen to confide in. Eh. It's really, really hard and therefore you've got to make it OK for them not to know.

In this section of the interview, and elsewhere, one can read his statements as revealing a strong tension between the duty to teach, (to help students retrace steps in their thinking and then lead them to a new understanding), and the duty not to harm. There is a concern in the following quotation, for example, that diagnosing problems even in a one-to-one interaction may involve inappropriately invasive actions. The quotation also draws attention to the question of exactly how a student may interpret the intentions of a tutor who is posing a series of questions:

> I think in a skills based area like the stats. ... like computing skill ... I am conscious sometimes that I've got it very badly wrong because you're, you're sitting with a student in front of a terminal, you're saying why did you do that. And that is actually a very aggressive thing to do and – as I say sometimes I know I get it completely wrong because the student I am sure leaves at the end of the day feeling, you know, why was he giving us such a hard time.

At another point in the interview where he was touching on the same general theme of "making it alright not to know ... to get it wrong", Tutor F referred more explicitly to the question of student intentions and purposes. He stated that he had "a lot of sympathy with Papert's notion about bugs and so on: but if you can think [of] error in a constructive way then you can learn from it rather [than] merely wishing to avoid being caught out in error." He then went on to consider the advantages that would result if students, who faced problems in understanding, could come to be less defensive and rather see it as their right to demand assistance from tutors. Tutor F's thoughts point up how building a climate of safety may be a difficult, and somewhat fragile, achievement. His comments, and those of other tutors presented earlier in this section, illustrate how achieving the goal of a safe climate may both support and conflict with the pursuit of other important aims.

Running through the comments of all of the tutors on this matter is also not only a concern with the benefits for practice of providing a safe environment, but also the belief that students should not be treated in face-threatening ways. In other words, this would seem to them to be an issue of moral principle not simply of pedagogic practice. Tutor J remarked: "We talked about this in our departmental meeting, and agreed that students have a right to silence – that one shouldn't browbeat them into speaking."

This section on *Creating a safe environment* has looked at the qualities of interaction, aspects of the 'moral order', that tutors see themselves as trying to instantiate in all of their classes. In the following section *Responding to different year groups*, attention moves from features that tutors would attempt to achieve in all of their classes, to the way in which they report a tailoring of their interactions to the needs of particular groups of students.

Responding to different year groups

The parts of the interviews where I explored with the tutors the adjustments, if any, that they made in style or approach between year groups give one a picture of the expectations that they held concerning the knowledge base and quality of participation of students at different stages in their academic career. Discussion of the differences between years, and of the need to adjust to these differences, also brought into focus the question of the intellectual and social distance between staff and students and the ways in which tutors sought to reduce this distance, or at least to minimise undesirable effects of this distance.

A number of the tutors recognised in a quite explicit fashion that it was more difficult for them to appreciate the anxieties and to capture the mind-set of first year students, than it was for them to enter into the experience of students in third and fourth years. Tutor E recounted how: "I do hope that I recognise the position of students and what they're trying to do: but I wouldn't doubt that I find that much easier to do by third year than I do in first year." Recognition of the difficulties involved in attempting to enter the perspective of a first year student occurs in the following quotation from Tutor G. The quotation also highlights differences that she perceives between first and fourth year tutorials in the nature and quality of the discussion:

> I think, I mean in many ways the fourth year one is much easier because you're, you're closer to being at an equal level with the fourth years. You can actually have more of a, of an academic discussion. Whereas with first years you've got to try and imagine what, what it's like to be, to be just starting with psychology.

Moving on to look at tutors' perceptions of student perceptions of tutors, there was a clear recognition on the part of the tutors that a considerable number of entrant students might be anxious about their new university environment and somewhat fearful of the tutor. An earlier section of this chapter has described the stress that tutors placed on using beginning tutorials to create a climate of safety. In discussing their beginning tutorials, some tutors also mentioned the importance of providing topics which entrant students could readily discuss from their existing stock of knowledge. One of the reasons that Tutor B advanced for providing topics which could be tackled without the need for any new, discipline-specific knowledge was to reduce the inhibiting effects of student perceptions of the large differences in expertise between themselves and members of academic staff :

> One of the things about students coming to University is, I'm sure, they've got this view that, you know, all these lecturers, et cetera, know so much about everything that their contribution isn't worthwhile. Well I try to, immediately they come to University to, to get them to talk about something they know, I don't know. Or at least I would claim not to know about it [smilingly -->] maybe.

Tutor F also engaged, quite strenuously, with the question of how entrant students might be perceiving the demands that were placed upon them. In addition he gave a clear description of how he saw the nature of his teaching task, the focus of his efforts, when engaging with a first year as opposed to a fourth year class. Looking first at fourth years, his account revealed his focus on the *particular* subject and his personal involvement which might threaten the pursuit of the ideal of being a 'non-directive' tutor:

> I suppose I see it as ... the tutor being a moderator in the group; but in the case of final year tutorials, the chances are you are talking about something which you actually find it very difficult to restrain your involvement with – so you are having a tutorial on a topic you actually do know something about ...

He then talked of the very different focus of his attention in first year tutorials – giving students a general grounding in the discipline – and recognised that there could be doubt as to whether entrant students and tutor shared a common purpose and view of the discussion:

> I mean, the students probably think they're learning about child sex abuse, but I suspect that what they learn about child sex abuse in terms of percentage incidences and all the rest of it, they, they will forget within the month. Eh, but what they should be learning is how to evaluate evidence, to build up a case – so it's, that's, that's my agenda. My agenda may be quite different from their agenda, I suppose, eh, and I would make that agenda explicit time and time again ...

When Tutor F came later to talk through the issues raised by the teaching of statistics and of skills teaching in areas such as information technology, he drew attention to the problem of "circularity" which may make it difficult for tutors and students in their first or second year to share a common agenda:

> .. you can't make demands on people until you've provided them with the skills to meet demands; and they can't see why the skills were important until the demands are laid upon them. .... So the problem for individual tutors is I think enormous – actually negotiating with the student about what, what you're there for. And, and then carrying along with that the realisation that you probably haven't understood quite, in the same way as the student has understood what the negotiation was all about.

Whereas Tutor F focused on the problems involved in tutors and first year students establishing a common 'agenda', Tutor G chose to highlight the very different styles of interaction that she believed were necessary for fourth year and first year tutorials:

> I think I have to do a lot less for the fourth years typically. I mean, they usually know what they want to talk about and have a fair idea what they want to say. So with the fourth years it's much more a case of just keeping it on the, on the right track and trying to, to raise some further issues for them to think about. Whereas with the first years I have to be that much more directive and define the problem and the issues for them much more. Em. [slight pause] I think the fourth years it's often a case of, of trying to help them to see the wood rather than focusing on the trees.

Tutor G was observed leading both a first year and a fourth year tutorial group. Analysis of the talk in her tutorials, which is proceeding, confirms that she did in fact act towards first and fourth years in the very different styles indicated in the above quotation. It will be argued in Chapter 8 that the quest to identify a single 'ideal type' of tutorial style may not be a very

profitable exercise and that success in tutoring would seem to rely in large part on an ability to respond in a flexible, sensitive fashion to the specific needs of a particular group of students. As Tutor G's statement implies, there is a need to tailor tutoring interactions to the level of subject knowledge, familiarity with the forms of academic discourse and confidence in speaking of the individual tutorial group.

Moving on from the difficulties in interaction that could arise from students lacking specific subject knowledge and skills, a theme which emerged in a few accounts was the problem posed when students held less sophisticated *general* conceptions of the nature of academic knowledge and purposes than the tutor. Tutor B, for example, remarked on how when she had first come across Perry's work on the qualitatively different stages through which students' intellectual and moral development could be seen to progress (Perry, 1970), she thought "Good grief. That fits my experience absolutely". The following quotation presents some of Tutor B's thoughts on this subject, and also serves as a reminder that there is not necessarily any immediately obvious practical benefit that flows from making a personal discovery of a fresh theoretical perspective on learning.

> ... other teachers would come and say to me, you know, the students are expecting me to give them a right answer and then I [laughing] probably have doubts most pretty often. And, and they really think I'm incompetent because I can't tell them the right answer; and I, you know, I got all this before I ever saw Perry's work. Then I thought, oh well, I see how that very much fits in. And yet it's also a cop out. Sometimes I feel it's an awful cop-out. Now I can just dismiss this by saying och this – this developmental stage, they'll get over, you know. [smilingly --->] So it's difficult.

The effects of inequalities between staff and entrant students in subject knowledge and procedural knowledge of how to operate in an academic environment has been a central theme running through this section. It was a theme which also featured strongly in Tutor J's interview. Tutor J, in considering the differences that she found between interacting with first as opposed to fourth year students, commented in a revealing way on how there was less intellectual inequality between herself and students in their final year. As the following quotation reveals, she also found a distinct difference in the quality of her *social* interaction with fourth year students:

> ... you can just be more informal to a certain extent and treat them as equals to a greater extent. I mean, I don't mean equals sort of – I mean equal in the kind of their intellectual capacity. I find it very – it is quite, quite distinctly different but it is hard to put your finger on exactly what it is – I mean it is not just the depth of the, the academic exercises – the sort of learning side of it. Eh, it is something to do with the way in which you, you socialise with them.

Some clues as to the possible source of this different quality of social interaction emerged slightly later in the interview, when she commented that though some fourth year students had "mentally moved on" and had their sights firmly set on the outside world, "there's another group of fourth year students who are almost so deeply entrenched in the system that they are – it's almost as though they're part of the department." She then described how "they have absorbed a kind of culture, and if they're your own students, from your own department then they will be very attuned to the personalities of the department and they will know you."

Assessing students' performance in tutorials?

Preceding sections of this chapter have sketched out the consensus that existed on what constituted central features of a good tutorial and considered the ways in which tutors viewed interaction with students from different year groups. The following two sections will attempt to add finer detail to the account of tutors' purposes and actions, and will introduce some new themes.

It will be recalled from Chapter 4 that one of the topics which was pursued with tutors was how they reacted to "advocacy in some quarters of the idea that students should be assessed on their performance in tutorials and seminars." (The assessment of individual performance in discussion groups is a commonplace activity in many North American institutions of higher education.) They were also asked for their reactions to the idea that more attention might be given within tutorials to the function of helping students to gain communication skills. The discussion of these two topics raised a number of interesting points which will be reported in this, and the following, section. Assessing the value of potential changes also had the

benefit, from my point of view, of leading the tutors to reflect on the values and goals which informed their current practice. Reactions to change helped to provide a sharper picture of what they wish to achieve at present.

Looking then at the question of a possible move towards assessing student performance in tutorials, this topic was discussed in nine of the ten interviews. No one reacted positively to the suggestion, although the stated reasons for disagreeing with the idea did vary somewhat from individual to individual. Objections of principle were raised to the idea and there was considerable concern expressed about the practical difficulties of carrying out such an assessment. Indeed for one tutor, opposition to the formal assessment of student performance in tutorials was based on the "pragmatic" grounds that it would be very difficult to implement properly, rather than on moral grounds.

A chief objection raised in many of the interviews was the way in which this change might create anxieties among the students. As an earlier section of this chapter has described, the provision of freedom from threat, an atmosphere of safety in which ideas could be freely expressed, was seen as a key matter in ensuring the success of tutorial groups. However, the thrust of some of the statements opposing assessment on the grounds that it would raise anxiety did not centre on practical consequences for the tutorial, but more on the fact that to create anxiety among students would be morally wrong. Here, for example, is Tutor A on this subject:

> - it's quite anxiety-producing to learn to develop arguments, to be verbal, to challenge other people. I think that's quite anxiety-producing enough without saying, yes, I'm now going to assess you on this.

In a similar vein, Tutor C stated that:

> I don't know what the logic would be. If it's designed to provide an incentive to get students to participate, I think, it's unnecessary. Or you get students, eh, you know suffering agonies. The medical students I work with suffering agonies of anxiety the night before a tutorial knowing that they had to speak for thirty seconds in order to ensure their 3%, or whatever it is. If that is the logic, then I'd be, I'd be opposed.

One tutor was quite explicit about stating that "I think somehow it's ethically wrong" and that "I would **hate** to do that." Her concerns clustered more around issues of fairness, rather than the infliction of anxiety which featured in the last two extracts. When prompted by me with the question "Exactly why ethically wrong, in your view?", Tutor E replied:

> Well because – a whole lot of issues. One is that I think, just this very question of advantage and disadvantage – on an economic, let's be blunt, on an economic basis. The other is, I do think people vary in temperament. For some people it's relatively easy, just because of their temperament, some it's hard: and then because I do still think that there are some children brought up, still perhaps in Scotland more than England, although I don't know, who are taught at home that you don't put yourself forward and that the gift of the gab is something **very** ah, meretricious and not to be aimed at. And I think they all learn maybe by the end that that's a pity, but they don't all know it near the beginning; and I think it would be very unfair. I **really think** it would be unfair to do it.

The concerns presented in this passage of how one could provide a fair assessment appeared in many of the other interviews; and in particular there was concern about how one could take "temperament" into account. Aside from providing a clear statement of concerns about fairness in assessment that were widely shared, the above passage also gives an interesting insight into how this tutor views student involvement in tutorials. She recognises that for some students there may be a need for a, possibly lengthy, period of acculturation before they will be prepared to take an active part in debate and emphasises the importance of providing as level a starting position as possible, of doing nothing which would exacerbate their initial disadvantages. I used the term 'acculturation' in the last sentence as the developmental progression highlighted by Tutor E is not a trivial change. As she suggests, for some students taking part in tutorials does not simply require them to gain experience, practice, which they have lacked in the past, but to change to a new set of values governing how one *should* communicate – to develop a new way of being and of presenting oneself.

Tutor I shared Tutor E's concerns about the fairness of any assessment procedure and raised quite a number of other worries surrounding the assessment of student performance. Included among these worries were the belief that:

> ... it would be inhibiting. If you feel you're assessed you're less likely to explore the margins of a subject, to take risks: ehm, to be provocative. Ehm, one thing I like at the moment is that they'll actually challenge me some of them, and I think if you're assessing them, they may well not do that and that would be, that would be sad.

Tutor I draws attention here to the barriers to communication that come from centring attention on one's performance rather than on the subject matter that is being discussed – a topic that has been examined earlier in this chapter. As she reflects on a threatening change to her current practice, some of her central beliefs about how tutorials should be conducted come sharply into focus. It is clear that she wishes to establish a 'safe', egalitarian atmosphere which will provide the conditions for a lively, intellectually challenging form of debate to take place – a climate where attention is deflected away from her role as an authority and she does not have any privileged, 'unchallengeable' status.

Slightly later in the interview her further comments on this topic of the assessment of student performance highlighted the importance that she placed on fostering co-operation, a theme which also emerged at other places in her discussion with me. She stated that:

> ... the other point to make about it is that, and I am sure this point's been made before as well, is that when you have students that come from a background where they are assessed, American students in particular ehm, ah, there's a competitive element in it because it's the sort of: "I've got to be heard before someone else says this", sort of thing: and I don't think it promotes, ehm, co-operation and sharing things.

Turning to a different theme, one of the objections of Tutor D to the assessment of student performance in tutorials raised the large question of where responsibility for success and failure should lie:

> I think in some ways I should be the person who's assessed on, on running the tutorials because it's my job to re-, to make sure that they come in and all the rest of it: and if I'm doing that properly they will feel able to speak if they wish to speak, and I ought to be able to shut them up if they go on too much.

Aside from what it has to tell us about how this individual tutor sees the responsibilities of his role, this statement also draws attention to the assumptions that schemes of assessment of student performance make a) about the duty of individual students to contribute and b) about how student contributions can be evaluated without any account being taken of the actions of the tutor.

The preceding paragraphs have outlined some of the objections in principle that were raised by the tutors to the notion of assessing student performance in tutorials – objections which in a number of cases clearly displayed the values and core purposes of individual tutors. Running through the reactions of almost all of the tutors to this question one can see an agreement of opinion on the importance of fairness and an avoidance of actions which might privilege particular groups of students and of providing a safe, anxiety-free atmosphere. There was a general concern, expressed in the words of Tutor G, that assessment of students "might start to interfere with the quality of their own experience." In summary, responses to this topic highlighted certain shared values and beliefs. In contrast, reactions to the idea that more attention might be given within tutorials to the function of helping students to gain communication skills brought out some differences in conceptions of the purpose of tutorials.

Tutorials as a forum for developing communication skills?

Two of the tutors had considerable reservations about greater weight being given to the matter of helping students to gain "communication skills". Some of the other tutors responded by indicating that they already saw this as a central purpose of their own tutorial work, and others took the question as an invitation to comment on what demands they made on students at the moment to present papers and argue a case. Of the nine tutors who discussed this question with me, seven saw increasing the communication skills of students as an important function of tutorials. However, as they went on to describe how they interpreted this aim in day to day practice, differences emerged in how proactive they were in giving students guidance on this matter, and in making the acquisition of the skills of argument and persuasion an explicit, central part of their tutorials.

Those tutors who attached strong importance to developing students' communication skills gave rationales which differed somewhat from individual to individual for weighting this function of tutorials quite heavily. Tutor I, for example drew attention in her account to the vocational importance of developing students' communication skills, and the need to respond to the demands of employers:

> Well I've always thought that that's what they should be about and ...I was involved with a group which ....was looking at the needs of employers in relation to what the universities were delivering and the big gap was, eh, kind of communication skills, collaboration - they wanted collaborative efforts, teamwork, ehm sharing things and I think it should be, if it could become an explicit objective of tutorial teaching ...

When reviewing a draft of this present chapter with me, Tutor I did, however, add an important qualification to this statement. While reaffirming the importance of the development of communication skills, she indicated her belief that the cultivation of these skills did not need to be treated as a separate task. She was of the opinion that such skills would arise 'naturally' in a successfully functioning tutorial, where there was a high level of student participation and a good quality of debate.

For Tutor A in Nursing Studies developing students' communication skills was seen as an integral part of the students' professional development:

> I tend to say that that is one of the functions, that they have to listen, they have to learn to develop argument ... and I tend to relate that to uhm their future profession, because they will be in groups for most of their profession, and they will have to, within that, explain, and give out arguments, and listen, and respond to challenges within their own professional lives. So I tend to use the tutorials to develop that. In a sense almost to tighten up their ideas.

Tutor E described how she pointed out to students the importance for their future career of being able to present ideas well. She saw the development of skills in clear and cogent argument as a central part of a university education:

> I think it's very wrong that they should have spent **years** at Edinburgh University and not be able to speak fluently, and with confidence, and succinctly and properly; and that was part of their education.

It will be illustrated later that, Tutor E also viewed tutorials from a feminist perspective and made a strong case for using tutorials to advance women's skills in debate and social presentation.

Some of the tutors talked through with me, in a very reflective manner, their own conception of the skills of argument that they were attempting to foster in their students. These conceptions of the skills of argument were far removed from the straightforward practice in individual, discrete, skills advocated in much of the social skills and counselling training literature (Robinson and Halliday, 1987). Returning to Tutor E, she laid great stress on the value of developing an 'impersonal' style of argument:

> I mean I'm old enough to actually believe that education, you know, is a very important and valuable thing. I think that being able to divorce subject matter and reasonable discourse from personalities is very important: and, you know, you do this partly through having diplomatic skills. So that you can argue very cogently against a point of view without involving either yourself or the other person, I think, is very important.

The emphasis here then would seem to be not simply on developing individual presentational skills, but on acquiring a particular *practice* in argument with its own normative assumptions about how one should debate matters with others. Tutor E went on to link this idea of arguing in an 'impersonal' fashion to gender issues, and to the way in which tutorials could be used to get women to reflect on their strategies of self-presentation and add to their repertoire of social skills. Her thoughts on this topic introduce a valuable perspective on the possible uses of small-group discussions in higher education and are worth quoting at some length:

> One can, for example, argue for a point of view that one doesn't oneself support or personally finds wrong at some level, I think, is very important; and, for example, the whole issue now of gender and the position of women, I think, has a great deal to do with being able to argue cogently and impersonally and be able also to waive attacks that are made personally and so on – is part of the intellectual equipment of an educated person. Because, of course, there's so many women studying psychology, and more and more of them as you go on. I certainly take the opportunity for the fourth year groups that I have, which are usually all women, to discuss gender as they often want to substantively, but to discuss how women present themselves, and how they might present themselves and how to deflect criticisms and so on – which you could call counselling or social skills training, or whatever.....and I would certainly emphasise for them that their social skills have to be better than the social skills of men have to be; and sometimes it isn't necessary, but sometimes it is. And I would, there, in small group teaching, say that when they read their papers, even if there were only three or four of us sitting here in this room, that they sit on the hard chair and that they do it like a presentation – and that's quite difficult even by fourth year for some students to do. But that's all the more reason [short laugh] why, I think, we should be doing it, as it were.

Moving on to look at how Tutor G saw the skills of argument, she was very exercised by the issue of the relationship between content, form of discourse and communication skill – an issue that was highlighted in the literature review. After stating that developing communication skills was one of the main functions that tutorials should serve, she went on to justify this claim in the following terms:

> Partly in terms of...preparing the students for the outside world, but not just that. I mean, I think it's so much tied up with their understanding of the discipline that if they can't communicate their understanding then you'll wonder whether they really do understand what they've been doing. I think part of being an academic is being able to communicate effectively. So I find it, I find it quite difficult to separate the two things.

In her initial statements on this topic then, the need for skill in communication to facilitate clear interaction between student and tutor and effective practice as "an academic" appears in the foreground. However, as she continues to talk through the topic, the picture becomes more complicated and attention shifts to the need for appropriate knowledge of content and forms of discourse as preconditions for effective communication:

> I think some of the difficulties that they may have with communication are related to uncertainties about content. I mean, if you asked them just to talk about their holidays, then they could probably do it [laughs] quite well. But, so it's partly an issue of, of learning about what sorts of vocabulary, what sorts of registers is appropriate to academic discourse.
> CA So it's communicating within a discipline rather than –
> TutorG **Yes**, but having said that I think, I think the skills are transferable as well, I think, you know, partly what they are doing is learning to communicate hopefully in various different disciplines; and then extracting from that some sort of general principles.

In this account, effective communication in academic contexts is seen as dependent on the accumulation of appropriate knowledge as well as skills: and developing communication 'skills' requires progress on a number of closely interconnected fronts. The analysis of transcripts of her tutorials is revealing the ways in which this tutor guided first year students towards the "sorts of vocabulary" appropriate to higher education in general, and her subject in particular.

The quotations that have been presented so far in this section have been concerned with the benefits of developing students' skills in the presentation of argument. In contrast, one of the tutors pointed out the possible danger to her conception of the purposes of higher education if a great deal of emphasis were placed on the teaching of "skills". Tutor J talked about the growing stress that she and other members of her department were placing during first term tutorials for first year students on developing "written skills" and "skills in reading and analysis and taking notes". She went on to reflect that:

..what you realise is that when you put attention on that kind of area then you diminish the depth of intellectual analysis, because you're talking a lot of the time about skills of doing things – even spend a whole tutorial doing that. So if you add another set of skills that you're supposed to be doing, one can see the position where you find of cru-, pushing out, the depth of understanding of the subject because you're talking all the time, or the emphasis lies in other areas and basically, it doesn't mean, it doesn't matter what you are studying if your purpose is to develop communication skills, and it doesn't matter if it is history or whatever; and there may well be a loss because of that. And whilst I would always argue that Economic and Social History gives as good an avenue to these kinds of skills as anything else, I would also argue that people do it for other reasons that, you know, it's because of a desire to study the particular subject. So I think we may, we, you know, you daren't spread people so thin; and I think the actual subject may lose out along the way.

This member of staff uses a wide range of different, tutorial activities and varies the style/structure of her tutorials, so it would be inappropriate to read this passage as a defensive reaction to any change. It is much more plausible to read it as a vigorous defence of a particular conception of the purposes of higher education, where the core emphasis is on developing an intrinsic interest in a particular discipline and active engagement with the content of that discipline. Some accommodation may be possible between implementing this conception of the purposes of higher education and a more vocational, instrumental conception which emphasises the acquisition of discrete skills; but there are distinct limits on the degree of accommodation that is possible. This quotation serves as a reminder that in the very limited time available in a weekly tutorial of an hour's length, clear, and possibly quite hard, choices concerning where to focus your efforts have to be made. Tutor J draws out the practical limitations on what can be achieved in an hour very clearly in the following passage, which occurs just slightly later in the interview:

And of course the simple fact is that these tutorials really are very brief experiences [laughing] – but once you've got them in, and on the seats, and kind of chatted a wee bit, and taken the register, and asked people about their colds and why they weren't here last week and stuff like that, you don't have much time actually.

Tutor H expressed a similar set of concerns about how a move towards placing greater emphasis on developing students' "communication skills" might shift the focus of attention away from acquiring knowledge in the discipline. He was not unsympathetic to somewhat more time and effort being spent on communication skills, stating that "maybe it would be helpful if we focused on them to a greater extent than we actually do at the moment". However, he felt that "the balance would be very important" and that "what would be worrying there would be [if] the communication skills objective became more important than dealing with the subject matter." He contrasted his own position on this matter with the practice of a "neighbouring department", which required "really formal presentation of things that are submitted to them" and it "appears that way sometimes, the presentation is more important than the substance and the content."

Constraints

The account which has been given so far in this chapter has tended to place in the foreground the autonomous striving of individual tutors to achieve particular goals. This account needs to be tempered by reporting some of the constraints which tutors identified on achieving their goals, and by pointing up how in small and large ways their practice was affected by particular departmental policies and the actions of colleagues.

One tutor, for example, described how some of the topics that were assigned by her department to all tutors as the focus of the work for the tutor group in a particular week did not readily lend themselves to engaged participation and argument. Another tutor commented quite disapprovingly of the practice, on one course where she taught, of individual groups moving on from "different tutors to different tutors", staying at the most for four meetings with each individual tutor. She felt that under this system "you don't have them long enough to develop your way of doing it ... I don't think they function very well as groups that way." The efforts made by one tutor to encourage students to read more widely, and to take a wider perspective on the subject matter that they were studying, were not assisted by the lecturer on the course, who was sending a very different message:

> ... my view was that the lecturer, the main lecturer on the course, early in the course was sending a very bad signal to the students. It is one, I think, that he does consistently; and it is to the, to the effect that if they attend the lectures and they get a good set of notes then that is more or less enough.

Tutor F identified a potential source of difficulty, which while not directly inhibiting his own efforts, might have a strongly unhelpful effect on how students interpreted and responded to his purposes. Chapters 5 and 6 have emphasised how students do not perceive tutorials in isolation, as discrete objects, but within the context of the teaching and learning environment of their course as a whole. An earlier section of this chapter noted how F saw his agenda in first year tutorials as: "what they should be learning is how to evaluate evidence, to build up a case." At the same time, he recognised that there might be distinct limits on the extent to which students were willing to see his agenda as genuine, and take it on board, when the assessment system was possibly giving them a contradictory message. He reflected on: "the extent to which it is reasonable for them to believe this [agenda] because at the end of the term they get a multiple choice question which asks, you know, is it a), b), c) or d) and they've got to have an answer."

Increase in group size

In addition to local, departmental constraints, such as those identified in the preceding two paragraphs, tutors had more general anxieties about how their practice might be adversely affected by having to cope with an increasing number of students. This was a matter of considerable concern.

One of the large departments examined in the present study had experienced considerable change. It had moved from a pattern of weekly tutorials for first year students to fortnightly tutorials for this year group, and individual tutorial groups had also increased in size. A member of staff in this department described how such a move had been driven by "financial stringency". He believed that it was a "retrograde" step and sympathised with students "who are distressed about it". On the subject of numbers, he saw "probably seven or eight" as "the optimal size"; and deplored the current situation where "We are running groups of twelve - ten, eleven, twelve now, which is despicable."

A tutor from another large department, which had seen a considerable increase in student numbers, talked in a similar fashion of the undesirable effects of an increase in the size of tutorial groups: "one has larger tutorials, and even ten is more than eight and twelve is more than eight for sure, so that's a bad thing." A tutor from a department which possibly had seen somewhat less pressure on numbers than the two departments discussed above, still regarded the move to a larger group size that she had experienced as a matter of concern: "One of the things I think is not a positive development is the increase in the size of tutorials. I think, I feel quite strongly that eight is the optimum."

Other tutors reported a less marked change in the size of tutorial groups and few immediate, negative effects for their own practice. However, there was some disquiet expressed by those tutors about what the future might hold in store. For example, one said "I can see it increasing, which I don't look forward to."

Some tutors gave specific reasons for their feelings of concern about increase in group size. Aside from the general negative effects on group dynamics which an increase in group size might bring, there were worries about not being able to know the individual students as well and that "it becomes actually quite difficult to gauge if anybody is having any kind of problems." An increase in group size also seemed, for some tutors, to represent a threat to the ideal that every student should have a fair chance to contribute, and to the practice of involving all students in the discussion – "above eight, you run into difficulties of people getting lost."

Moving from perceptions of the direct effects of an increase in student numbers on the quality of the tutorial experience, to consider more 'indirect' effects, one tutor highlighted the possible deleterious effects on teaching performance of the increased general workload that most academic staff at Edinburgh University are now shouldering. He outlined the importance in his view of engaging in a "patient", respectful exploration of difficulties in understanding with a student on a one-to-one basis or in a group; and pointed out the difficulties of maintaining that quality of sensitive attentiveness in the current climate where academic staff felt themselves under a lot of pressure. He talked of how:

... that is another area where I think the general frustration with the whole system that we find ourselves in is to the detriment of the overall experience of the students ... I think the students can expect us to be patient with them. And if external pressures make us less patient, I think that's – it's not their fault.

Student perceptions that can create distance and difficulties in communication

In addition to the 'institutional' factors which have just been examined; another constraint on achieving an informal group atmosphere and engaged discussion is student perceptions of certain members of staff as being figures of authority who must be treated with circumspection. This theme has already been addressed in Chapter 6 from the students' perspective. Expertise in small-group work, an attractive, outgoing personality, considerable skills in 'face-work' may help members of staff to play down the distance that exists between them and students; but differences in age, interests, status and in particular power within the institution cannot be wholly disguised. Tutor C talked of how an increase in status and authority which had come with the years brought along with it a certain distancing from the students - a wariness on their part. Here is his honest and moving narrative of change over time:

Also as I get older, there's just that much more of a distance between myself and the tutees. When I first came here....virtually everybody in the Faculty, all the members of staff in the faculty were under the age of thirty and there really – it was just after the 1960s. And there really wasn't that much distance eh, eh, in chronological years or socially between the staff and eh students; and I used to take tutorials over in the Meadows bar, or out into the gardens and do all these, you know these, things that were done in those, in those days. Now I don't think that's on. I don't think that's on just more so, I think there's – students are more daunted, more intimidated by me than they, they would have been twenty years ago – a little more reluctant to, eh, reveal themselves both because I'm thirty years older than most of them, and because I'm the head of the class. I'm in charge of the course and a lot stands or falls on how they present to me.
..... and I had a terrible experience teaching my *X course* class – last year for the first, for the first time I couldn't get discussion going and I was very, very distressed by it – because I, it's, that's the kind of, it's these discussions from which I learn immensely. I have very bright students, very motivated students and [I'm] for ever hearing things I've never heard before – something I've not heard before. And I talked to one of the brighter students; and she said, look, eh,

> we're just afraid to argue with you because we just assume you're the authority, the expert, and, you know, anything we say is going to get shot down. And, uhm, that's, you know, that's like – that's not, not my style. I was very distressed, and just because I'm thirty years older than them.

This passage can be read as pointing to the direct, strong effects of differences in institutional status, in power, on interaction between students and staff in higher education. While I would not dispute this reading myself, I would suggest that the second paragraph can be interpreted as showing how, (from the point of view of a successful tutor such as Tutor C at least), the effects of these differences are successfully mitigated as a matter of routine, and do not appear as particularly problematic. The "terrible experience" when "for the first time I couldn't get discussion going" is cast as an unusual incident which throws into the foreground questions of authority that usually would be kept in the background – "that's not, not my style."

Summary

Clear parallels exist between the way that the members of staff discussed particular features of tutorials, and the comments of the student participants on these aspects of tutorials. Chapter 8 will examine points of similarity in the accounts that staff and students provided of the nature and purposes of tutorials. Chapter 8 will also highlight some of the key themes which have featured in this chapter:

- creating a climate of safety;
- the 'moral order' that should prevail in a tutorial;
- the potential tension between different, important purposes;
- the features of the practice of academic argument;
- and the importance of tutors tailoring their actions to the needs of particular groups of students.

Chapter 8

Discussion

Organisation of the chapter, and summary of principal themes

In Chapter 2, some disquiet was expressed over the fact that preceding work on small group teaching has had a fairly narrow focus, concentrating on aspects of the process of discussion and group dynamics. Small group work has also been studied as a discrete form of teaching, with little attention being paid to the way in which tutorials affect and are affected by other parts of the learning and teaching system of higher education.

In the present study, therefore, it was regarded as important to move away from examining tutorials simply as an object in themselves, and to consider how the student participants perceived the connections between tutorials and other parts of a course. It also appeared to be important to look at the functions that a tutorial might play in addition to the facilitation of undergraduates' discussion of a specific topic within a discipline – functions such as being a forum for the exploration of personal problems in understanding. Adopting a fairly wide investigative span has led to the need to analyse and present interview material on a considerable number of different topics. In consequence devoting this final discussion chapter to a minute examination of all of the 'findings', issues and themes which have been reported on in chapters 5, 6 and 7 would have given the reader a very time-consuming and somewhat tedious task. It seemed much more profitable to focus discussion around a number of key themes. These themes have been chosen to capture what appeared to be the most salient issues that emerged from an analysis of the participants' talk. Using these themes as organising devices for discussion also allowed points of comparison and contrast with preceding work on small-group teaching to be drawn out; whilst enabling relevant research and theorising introduced in Chapter 3 to be employed to frame the findings of the study.

Before setting out on an exploration of these themes, the section entitled *cautions and caveats* draws attention to a number of the limitations of the study and to the need for caution in analysis and interpretation. At the risk of sounding sententious, this consideration of the limitations of the present study is meant to be more than a token exercise to meet the rhetorical conventions of a thesis. The discussion of methodology in Chapter 4 has considered the need to be alert to the features of the context in which research is conducted, and to the culture and historically contingent events which shape this particular context. This methodological emphasis on context and history dictates that an appropriate modesty is observed in analysing interview material and building interpretations.

After raising a number of points concerning method and delivering a reminder on the need for caution in making generalisations from the present study, the chapter turns to consider a principal feature of the participants' talk concerning tutorials in the section, *instrumental and moral concerns.* This section highlights the fact that participants' talk on tutorials was marked by both instrumental and moral concerns, and considers the challenge for analysis and interpretation posed by the presence in participants' accounts of these different, but closely interwoven, sets of concerns. Attention then turns to *tutorials in context,* where the perceived connections between tutorials and other parts of a student's course of study are examined and the student participants' views on the distinctive contributions that tutorials could make to a course of study are recapitulated.

Two of the leitmotivs of Abercrombie's writings on learning and on small group teaching were the need to recognise the part that emotions played in learning, and the emotional work involved in successful mastery of a subject. The current study has also been alert to the affective dimensions of small group teaching, but with a rather different focus of attention from Abercrombie. Abercrombie placed great emphasis on the influence of unconscious processes on thinking and interaction, and on the emotional conflicts and resistances that can be involved in achieving intellectual change. It is clearly important for both theorising about education and good practice that sufficient attention is given to these affective aspects of learning highlighted by Abercrombie. However, in the current study the salient relationship that emerged from analysis of student participants' interview

talk was between affect and social identity within the group. This relationship is explored within the section *a sense of personal contact: affect and identity.* This section also looks at the student participants' talk on the emotional quality of the interaction between tutor and students, their belief that tutors ought to display a personal interest in students. In addition, the contrasts in perspective that were observed between the 'more participative' and the 'quieter' students are discussed within this section.

Consideration of the conditions that were identified by participants as leading to a satisfying sense of belonging within a group or to anxiety and discomfort leads into a discussion of *power: legitimate and unacceptable displays of tutor authority.* Here the complex set of expectations that the participants had regarding the obligations of a tutor and how tutors should, and should not, display their authority are explored. The scrutiny of the participants' talk on matters related to authority, responsibilities and power in tutorials also raises a number of important theoretical issues which are pursued later in the chapter. The chapter criticises the way in which some writers have conceptualised the exercise of power in educational settings; and indicates directions that it might be profitable to follow in constructing a new, more satisfactory theoretical approach to understanding the nature of power relations in higher education.

The tutor's position as subject expert and teacher was viewed by the student participants as a source of both legitimate authority and obligations to put that knowledge to good use in teaching interactions. At the same time, the much greater knowledge of the content and practices of a discipline possessed by a tutor was recognised as a powerful asymmetry in position between students and tutor. Discussion of how tutors were expected to perform their role as teachers is provided in the section *knowledge and discipline, the tutor as teacher.* This section recaps on the teaching actions which the student participants identified as being of considerable value. Attention is drawn to the affective character of these successful teaching actions as well as their intellectual benefits. A picture is constructed from the accounts of both staff and student participants of the work that tutors achieved in 'disciplining' students' statements, in moving students' understandings towards expert positions within a discipline.

It was recognised in Chapter 6 that there is room for potential conflict between the different goals that students expect tutors to pursue. Chapter 7, The Tutor's Perspective, has revealed that the tutors themselves identified dilemmas that they faced in everyday practice - dilemmas which resulted from a tension between competing purposes. In the section the *dilemmas of tutoring* the difficulties posed by the need for tutors to choose between conflicting purposes are examined in some depth. A clearer recognition of the existence of these dilemmas might bring about a shift in our views of the nature of teaching.

A central theme which emerged from the analysis of the student participants' interviews was that over time there were marked shifts in their experience of tutorials. Students in their third and fourth years recounted how their actions in, perceptions of, and attitudes towards, tutorials had changed over the years of their academic career. The qualitative changes in participants' experience of tutorials as they became acculturated to the ways of academe are considered in the section *joining the tribe: changes over time.* This section points up the parallels between the student participants' account of their development and the tutors' views on how their interactions with final year students were qualitatively different from their interactions with first year students.

As the participants progressed in their academic career, they gained experience, confidence and skill in making appropriate use of the forms of academic discourse, including the matter of arguing a point with others in a style that is viewed as socially appropriate within academic contexts. The section of the chapter entitled *the practice of argument* considers a number of observations made by staff and student participants concerning the form and style of argument within tutorials, including the insistence by Tutor E on the importance of students learning to argue in an 'impersonal' manner.

Much of this discussion chapter centres around identifying and analysing the expectations that the participants held in common concerning the social and moral order that should prevail within a tutorial. The penultimate section, *common expectations, contrasting perspectives,* focuses in on key features of this social and moral order. At the same time it considers important points of

difference that emerged in student opinion on how discussion should be structured.

The final part of the chapter, *directions for future work on small-group teaching*, gives a brief indication of the topics that are being pursued in the analysis of transcripts of tutorial talk. It also highlights a number of topics in small group teaching, and in one-to-one teaching interactions between tutors and students, which it would be very profitable to investigate in future work.

Cautions and caveats

There is a tendency evident in some qualitative studies to leap from a very measured presentation and analysis of field material in earlier chapters to setting out quite bold claims and interpretations in a final discussion chapter. In this final chapter of the thesis, I will attempt to remain true to the strategy of analysis and presentation outlined in the Methodology chapter and avoid making large claims which ignore the context in which evidence was collected.

It was my aim in the Methodology chapter to provide readers of the thesis with a fairly detailed account, not only of research procedures but also of my own stance as observer, interviewer and analyst. This account was designed to allow them to make an informed judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of my general research approach and the specific procedures that were employed. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have also attempted to present and analyse material in a manner which allows a reader to gain a clear picture of how my reading of the participants' perceptions of tutorials has been derived from the interview transcripts. The details provided in the Methodology chapter and the strategy for presenting material that has been followed throughout the thesis should allow readers themselves to form an exact sense of the limitations of the present study. As a reader, as well as author, of this thesis there are a few cautionary points concerning sampling and research context that I myself would like to highlight.

Looking first at an issue concerning sampling, the Methodology chapter has presented the reasons for choosing a group of 'expert tutors' for this study

and the advantages which seemed to flow from this decision. In passing, it is interesting to observe that there was a very large degree of agreement among this group of ten 'expert' tutors in their perspectives on tutorials. These individuals, identified by students and their peers as good tutors, did appear to share a *tutoring culture*, a common set of concerns, values and ways of interpreting tutorials.

At the same time it seems important to restate the caveats that were given in Chapter 4 about the nature of this sample of tutors. A randomly drawn sample might very well have disclosed more variation in opinion on key aspects of tutorials. It was noted in Chapter 4 that expert tutors might possibly have a different *quality* of tutoring experience from novice, or less successful, tutors. As successful practitioners, the group of tutors in the present study also did not state or show anxiety about the public display of their subject knowledge - an anxiety that past research suggests may be experienced by individuals who are beginning to tutor. The expert tutors interviewed in this sample were very well placed to reveal the local 'cultural' consensus on what made for good tutoring practice, but they could not represent the concerns of colleagues with less experience and skill who do not have as secure a membership of this culture.

In reading this thesis there is clearly also a need to be alert to the nature of the context where the interview material was gathered. In the majority of social science subjects there is much 'unsettled territory' where debate is vigorously pursued between the proponents of different perspectives. Undergraduates are typically introduced early on in their academic career to the debates that shape their discipline and to an appreciation of the fact that there may be a number of competing 'expert' positions on the same topic, all of which possess both strengths and weaknesses. Within discussion groups, students can engage, to some extent at least, in the argument between stance and counter stance on a topic within the discipline. The content of most social science subjects would thus seem to be particularly well suited to discussion by undergraduate students. By contrast in disciplines where the content taught to undergraduates in the early years of their degree is more 'settled', (less marked by continuing, active debate), discussion of parts of the curriculum by undergraduates may be a somewhat more problematic enterprise. Problematic or not, it seems plausible to suggest that the nature

of discussion is likely to be different in disciplines where the undergraduate curriculum contains much settled territory. Given the potential importance of these disciplinary differences, it seems necessary to be very tentative about the degree to which the perceptions of social science students concerning tutorials might be shared by students who come from a very different disciplinary background.

Another aspect of the research context needs to be borne in mind when considering the findings of the current study. As Chapter 4 noted, within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Edinburgh University considerable emphasis is placed on the matter of students acting in a co-operative, collaborative fashion within tutorials. Other institutions might be marked by a quite different ethos and promote a more competitive form of interaction in small groups. It was observed earlier in the thesis that: "Differences in practices and values across institutional contexts will lead to differing sets of perceptions of small group teaching."

There is a further and less obvious, but still potent, limitation on the claims that can be made on the basis of this study. In Chapter 2, I noted Gergen's (1973) caveat concerning the historically contingent nature of theorising and research in social psychology. This caveat very much also applies to this present study into perceptions of teaching, learning and social processes in higher education. In the context of the present study, it should be borne in mind that the higher education system in the United Kingdom is continuing to undergo a period of rapid change. As this change within higher education and the wider culture accumulates some of the material and analysis presented in this thesis will no longer give a valid representation of reality. This study, and others of its type, are historically bound.

Instrumental *and* Moral concerns

A very interesting, general feature of the talk on tutorials of both student and staff participants merits close attention. Talk on many of the matters that were perceived as being of key importance, (for example maintaining a safe, informal group atmosphere or the role that the tutor should play in facilitating debate), can be seen to have a dual aspect. With respect to the topic of a safe, informal group atmosphere, for instance, informants justified the provision of an atmosphere of this type in terms of the benefits that it brought in engaged participation and listening. However, at the same time their talk suggested that an atmosphere where individuals could feel that they were safe from threat *ought* to be provided, that it was a moral obligation for such a group climate to be in place.

A recognition of the interweaving of instrumental and moral reasoning in the accounts that people provide of particular features of social life is not a new insight. Goffman (1959), in one of the less frequently cited chapters of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, observes that:

> When we examine the order that is maintained in a given region, however, we find that these two kinds of demands, moral and instrumental, seem to affect in much the same way the individual who must answer to them, and that both moral and instrumental grounds or rationalizations are put forth as justification for most standards that must be maintained. (p.110)

Although it is not a new insight, it is one that has perhaps received insufficient attention, and in particular it has not been used to illumine the processes of social interaction in educational settings. However, the impetus given by Shotter, (whose work was reviewed in Chapter 3), to bring to the foreground the *ethical* and *rhetorical* nature of social life and learning may help to bring about a change in educational research practice.

There is a danger, however, in the current study that if participants' talk concerning the moral order which they believed did and should govern interaction in tutorials is foregrounded in the analysis, their more instrumental concerns may be pushed into the background. It is my intention that this should not happen. As I have taken pains to establish, the participants were concerned to note in their talk both *what did work well* and

how things should work. Given that past work in this area has been concerned to illuminate students' and tutors' instrumental reasoning concerning tutorials but has given little attention to moral reasoning on interaction in tutorials, it seemed appropriate in the present discussion chapter to devote rather more space in the following sections to considering the moral order that participants believed ought to prevail in a tutorial than to their instrumental concerns. This does not mean, however, that these instrumental concerns have been neglected in this thesis. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have examined the participants' talk on the features that made for a well functioning tutorial and given due weight to these instrumental matters.

Tutorials in context

An important objective of this thesis has been to depart from preceding research studies which have very much tended to focus in narrowly on student discussion groups as a discrete form of teaching and learning. The present study has attempted to view tutorials within a wider context, in part by asking student participants for their thoughts on the relation between tutorials and other parts of their course.

When attention was focused on the perceived connections between tutorials and other parts of a course, certain of the commonly occurring constraints on achieving engaged participation by all the student members of a tutorial came into view. Chief among these constraints was the competing demands that students faced from other coursework. As the synopsis provided at the beginning of Chapter 6 noted, tutorial work at Edinburgh University is not assessed and student participants acknowledged that when they were under time pressure the demands of assessed work were given precedence. The participants also recognised that when they failed to prepare appropriately, as a result of competing demands from other work or for other reasons, the quantity and quality of their participation fell markedly. This is a simple point; but it is not a trivial matter for good practice. Giving more thought to the structuring of the preparation that students need to do for tutorials, and dovetailing tutorial preparation into other coursework demands, could bring about a considerable improvement in the quality of tutorials.

There was considerable variation in the student participants' perception of the extent to which they had found tutorials and lectures to be connected up with each other. A division of opinion was also evident over the value of maintaining a tight link between lectures and tutorials. For some students this was an important matter. They advocated a close connection between lectures and discussion work on the grounds that such a link allowed them to develop a tight, sharply defined understanding of course content. In contrast, other participants argued for only loose links between tutorials and lectures as a way of gaining a wider understanding of a subject, including different theoretical perspectives on topics. Yet other participants argued for an intermediate position between these two poles of either a very strong or a very weak connection.

The division of opinion on this matter can be seen then to be linked, at least to some degree, to the participants' stylistic preferences for tackling academic tasks and to differences over the value of cultivating particular forms of understanding. Issues for tutoring practice raised by the need to accommodate students with markedly different styles of approaching academic tasks will be explored later in this chapter, in the section *common expectations, contrasting perspectives.*

It will be recalled that student participants, in addition to considering the relation between tutorials and other aspects of a course, identified a number of distinctive contributions that tutorials could make to their overall academic progress. It was possible to categorise students' talk on this topic into six categories: *clarifying points from lectures, usefulness for exam preparation, adding value and examining specific subject content in greater depth, providing a different perspective, adding interest/motivation* and *the possibility to explore problems in understanding.* These categories clearly differ markedly from each other, and there is thus a fairly wide range of ways in which students may view tutorials as assisting their general academic progress. Given the variation that previous research has shown to exist in students' general purposes in studying and styles of working, it is not surprising that participants should differ in what they saw as the distinctive contributions that tutorials could make to their understanding of a course as a whole.

A detailed account was provided, in Part IV of Chapter 6, of the student participants' talk on tutorials as a forum where any problems in understanding course content could be explored. This account presented participants' opinions on the extent to which the possibility to explore 'personal problems in understanding' had been realised and the types of reasons which students advanced for being reluctant to raise problems that they were facing within a tutorial. Participants reported a greater willingness to explore problems when there was a good, informal group atmosphere and quality of relationship with the tutor. An exchange between a second year student and myself pointed up the necessity to deconstruct the term 'problem in understanding'. In addition, this particular exchange highlighted the need that may exist for tutors to take a very active part in assisting novices in a discipline to 'shape' their difficulties into an appropriate form – a form which then allows these difficulties to be resolved.

The same part of Chapter 6 examined participants' perceptions of the extent, and the adequacy, of the advice that they had received from tutors on essay-writing, exams and reading. A strongly expressed theme that ran through the participants' comments on study advice was the importance of tutors *making explicit their expectations* of how students ought to be engaging with their studies and of giving a *clear account* of the criteria that are used within a specific discipline to judge the quality of course work. When one views *studying,* not simply as a matter of individuals efficiently applying themselves to tasks, but as a form of learning which is shaped by the norms and practices that characterise academic institutions, this demand for clear communication of tutors' expectations can be seen as a very reasonable request. There is a need for tutors to ensure that students are not left to second guess what is required of them, but are assisted to construe and perform academic tasks in a manner which is regarded as appropriate within institutions of higher education.

Focusing attention on the part that a tutor may play in assisting students to 'resolve problems' in understanding and as a mentor leading students into the appropriate way of approaching various academic tasks brings into view some limitations in Abercrombie's position on the role and responsibilities of the tutor. Abercrombie's formulation of the role of the tutor, which was reviewed in Chapter 2, may well be an appropriate one in small group

teaching situations where the small group is concerned exclusively with the discussion of a specific topic. However, at Edinburgh, and indeed other UK universities, tutorials can and do serve other functions in addition to the debate of specific topics within a discipline. Engaging appropriately with a task such as assisting a student who has a 'problem' in understanding a concept may require a tutor to act in a more pro-active way than is suggested by Abercrombie's guidelines for good tutoring practice. To my mind, Abercrombie's position on the role and responsibilities of the tutor may give very useful pointers to practice, but it is not a sufficient guide in itself. Her formulation of the tutor's role does not capture all of the rich variety of work that a tutor may accomplish within a tutorial hour, and may not be appropriate for some of the tasks that the tutor undertakes.

In my observational work, (which will be discussed briefly in the concluding section of this chapter), I was very struck by the way in which all of the members of this group of ten expert tutors tailored the style of their actions to the immediate task that was at hand. For example, a tutor might intervene to 'teach' about a topic when students obviously lacked the background knowledge necessary for an informed discussion and then adopt a more 'hands-off' position once this information had been given. Rather than consistently following a single *global* style of interacting with students, this group of tutors showed a flexibility of response, fitting their actions to the demands of the *local* context of talk. A later section of this chapter will examine further this question of tutors' flexibility of response, when the adjustments that tutors made in style of interacting with first as opposed to final year groups are considered.

A sense of personal contact: affect and identity

The preceding section of the chapter has pointed out that there may be a need to reformulate Abercrombie's conception of the role of the tutor to take account of the realities of day to day practice. The participants in the present study, however, did share with Abercrombie a belief in the central importance for successful interaction and learning of creating a safe climate within the group. Tutors viewed the provision of a climate of safety within the tutorial group as a key matter and were also very concerned to avoid acting towards individual students in a face-threatening manner. The student participants, for their part, believed that tutors had a responsibility to ensure the existence of a relaxed, informal atmosphere where they could feel free from threat.

Abercrombie saw the provision of a climate of safety as necessitated in part by the fact that changing current perceptions and conceptions and building new understandings could be anxiety provoking and was likely to involve emotional as well as intellectual work. The student participants in this current study did not talk during their interviews about the 'internal' emotional tensions connected with learning which engaged Abercrombie's attention. However, they were exercised about the potential threats to their social identity as academically competent individuals that could flow from formulating or defending a position in public. A relaxed, informal group atmosphere was seen as reducing anxieties concerning a potential loss of face and thus increasing participation.

The student participants' expectations regarding the nature of the emotional climate that should prevail within tutorials cut somewhat deeper than a concern that they would be safe from the threat of loss of face. Over and above this 'defensive' concern, was a more assertive claim that their individuality should be recognised within tutorials and that tutors should demonstrate a more *personal* response to students. It was assumed that the interaction between a good tutor and individual students within a group would be marked by a felt sense of personal engagement which acted to minimise social distance. In other words, participants believed that the interaction between a tutor and students should be marked by a democratic

form of discourse and that its affective character should be somewhat akin to that of a personal relationship.

The affective aspects of the interaction with the tutor also featured strongly in the students' descriptions of particular teaching actions that they had found to be valuable. Participants expressed appreciation for the shaping and direction of understanding provided by the actions of individual tutors and commented on the motivating effects of this supportive shaping of understanding by the tutor. They welcomed the attention that was being given to them as an individual and the support given to their efforts to contribute and understand. Some participants indicated the feelings of enjoyment and engagement that arose when a tutor's teaching actions gave them the challenge to think more deeply about a topic.

The motivating effects of friendly, engaged interaction with peers with whom you had established an acquaintance also figured largely in the accounts that participants provided of their experience of tutorials. Participants in their third and fourth year described changes over time in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction within tutorials, which were in part the result of the members getting to know each other quite well over the years and coming to feel quite relaxed about interacting with each other.

The preceding paragraphs have considered commonalties in the student informants' perceptions of the affective aspects of tutorial groups; including the importance that was placed on the existence of a safe, informal group atmosphere, a felt sense of engagement with the tutor and peers, and a personal quality of interest and response by the tutor.

At the same time, it is important to note differences between the informants in the way that they viewed and felt about their identity as participants in a tutorial. There are points of sharp contrast, for example, between the perceptions of the more 'participative' and of the 'quieter' students within the sample. The 'participative' enjoyed taking an active part in proceedings, viewed taking the initiative to speak as an unproblematic matter and entered spontaneously into the discussion. By contrast the 'quieter' students tended to see a need to be more circumspect about intervening in discussion and their thoughts and feelings about participation were marked by strong

concerns about a possible public loss of face. These self-protective face concerns were in turn customarily associated with an image of oneself as being less able to contribute well to debate than other students. Depending on the individual's current self-image and history of learning and interacting with others, the same tutorial might be regarded as a source of enjoyable interaction with others or as a terrain which contained hazards as well as rewards and which needed to be negotiated with care.

Power: legitimate and unacceptable displays of tutor authority

Before setting out on the discussion of what the participants in this study regarded as legitimate and unacceptable displays of tutor authority, it seems appropriate to restate some of the principal features of the view of power relations that informed the analysis of interview material. A straightforward but important feature was an attempt to avoid clouding the analysis by taking a prescriptive stance as a researcher on the power relations that ought to obtain within tutorials[1]. Chapter 2 described how previous research on small group teaching has tended to be guided by certain preconceptions concerning the nature of the relationship that ought to prevail between a tutor and a group of students. 'Data' which did not fit these preconceptions was viewed as evidence of deficiencies on the part of tutors. Analysis in the present study, by contrast, was guided by a wish to avoid taking a preformed and prescriptive stance to the interview material.

There was also a desire to break away from seeing power relations within tutorials in very black and white terms. Seeing tutorials as characterised either by tutor control and inequalities or as 'student-centred' and egalitarian did not correspond to the more complex social reality which this study revealed. The participants' perceptions of the relationships of power and of consent within tutorials which will be discussed in the next few paragraphs, and my own observations, are consonant with the view of power relations presented by Linell (Linell, 1990). It will be recalled from Chapter 3 that Linell argued against the utility of categorising social situations as being marked *either* by power relations *or* by exchange relations. Moving away

[1] Clearly as a practitioner, I do have a stance on the nature of the relationship that ought to obtain between a tutor and a group of students; but that practitioner role with its set of working norms and assumptions is a quite different one from my current researcher role.

from this simple, unhelpful dichotomy, Linell presented a taxonomy of social situations which distinguished between the two dimensions of symmetry-asymmetry and co-operation-confrontation. This distinction between co-operation-confrontation and symmetry-asymmetry is a very useful insight, and it has informed the analysis of interview material concerning power relations in university tutorials.

The set of expectations that the student participants expressed concerning how tutors ought to exercise their authority cannot be readily captured in any simple framework. Tutors were seen as having legitimate authority in certain areas and were expected to pursue certain tasks with vigour, while at the same time they were expected to show considerable restraint in other areas. A key matter was the *manner* in which tutors displayed their authority. Whether or not a tutor intervention was viewed as a legitimate display of authority also depended on the *particular purposes* that were perceived to be driving the intervention.

The order that participants believed ought to prevail in tutorials comes more sharply into focus when one examines what were regarded as breaches of this order. Displays of tutor authority which the student participants saw as unacceptable included the overt display of power, or actions which highlighted the differences in social status between students and the tutor. Actions of this type were viewed as conflicting with the students' rights to certain forms of respect. Such actions clashed with the expectations that status differences would be minimised – expectations established by the informal atmosphere and 'democratic' forms of address which usually prevailed in tutorials.

It was also regarded as unacceptable for tutors to use their authority to moralise about the shortcomings of students or to scrutinise students' statements in a way which made them feel ill at ease. Face-threatening actions by tutors were to be avoided. In addition, tutors were expected to respect, what has been termed as, students' negative freedom, their entitlement to be safe from undue pressure to participate in discussion.

Strong feelings were expressed against tutors who talked too much, thereby infringing the students' rights to participate, and against tutors who

'dominated' proceedings by exercising a very tight control over the direction of debate. Tutors were thus expected to discipline their own contributions to the discussion and to observe restraint in setting the direction of discussion. Students also strongly disliked peers who 'dominated' the discussion, i.e., claimed an unfairly large share of the floor.

The norms concerning how tutorial interaction should proceed that were revealed by the student participants' talk on unacceptable displays of tutor authority, were very much shared by the group of ten tutors.

Student talk on unacceptable displays of tutor authority displayed a mixture of instrumental and moral concerns of the sort which has been referred to earlier in the chapter. It was believed both that such assertions of tutor authority *ought* not to occur and that when they did occur the dynamics of the group were disturbed and discussion was inhibited.

A similar mixture of instrumental and moral concerns characterised the student informants' talk on acceptable displays of tutor authority, such as moderating the flow of discussion to ensure that it was not 'dominated' by individual students. Tutors were also expected to use their authority as leaders of the group to involve all members in the discussion, and in particular to invite contributions from quieter individuals.

Knowledge and discipline, the tutor as teacher

Staying on the theme of acceptable displays of tutor power, there was a clear expectation that tutors would make appropriate use of their authority as subject experts to *tutor*. Informants expressed their appreciation of tutors who engaged during the tutorial hour in one-to-one teaching interactions with individual students to enable them and the group as a whole to gain new knowledge and perspectives, and to refine, or to construct, new understandings of particular topics. One important expectation of tutors in their role as subject experts and teachers was that they would act to right discussion which had gone "a bit astray". Participants talked of the need for the tutor "to correct", or "to clarify", student contributions to the discussion where necessary. This was regarded as a legitimate exercise of the tutor's

authority and indeed a type of action that the tutor *ought* to perform. At the same time it was assumed that any 'corrective' teaching actions would be carried out in a socially sensitive manner which would not threaten the student's public face of competence.

The asymmetry in knowledge between tutors and students was thus not perceived as inherently problematic by the student informants. Key matters for the informants were the *manner* in which this knowledge was put to use and that it should be displayed solely for the *purpose* of enhancing students' understanding of a subject.

The study gave insight not only into how the student participants viewed the tutor's authority and responsibilities as a teacher and expert in a discipline, but also into how some viewed the status of their own knowledge. Chapter 6 described how some participants raised concerns about the authority that students could claim for their own knowledge of a discipline. These concerns coloured how they viewed learning from the contributions of peers, and were also cited as a reason for feeling reluctant to challenge fellow students on a point. The uncertainty that these participants displayed about the status of their own or their fellow-students' comments points to the difficulties that may exist in bringing about the change in the "authority-dependency relationship" which Abercrombie advocated. Given the large asymmetry in knowledge of a discipline that exists between academic staff and undergraduate students, it would seem unwise to dismiss the concerns raised by these participants as being unrealistic or immature perceptions of their own position in the academic community. It would also seem inappropriate to explain these concerns away by recourse to the notion that their comments betrayed a lack of academic self-esteem. Indeed, it is even possible that participants who raised doubts about the warrant that students could claim for their formulation of points in discussion were displaying a more realistic appraisal of their position as novices in a discipline than their peers who did not voice such concerns.

Student perceptions of the degree of warrant which it is appropriate to give to their own, or their peers', contribution to discussion have not been examined in previous work. The findings of the present interview study would seem to indicate that this topic would be a very profitable one to

explore in future research on group and collaborative learning. A strong base of empirical work on this topic might also assist the development of a clear theoretical perspective on issues concerning the warranting of student knowledge.

Moving on to focus on the tutor as a teacher, two main themes featured in the accounts which student participants gave of teaching actions which they had perceived to be of considerable value. One theme was the intellectual benefits which came from tutors working in a very interactive way to shape an individual's ideas towards an appropriate formulation within a discipline, or to 'scaffold' students' attempts to solve a problem. It was observed in Chapter 6 that during such a teaching dialogue "the 'diagnosis' by a tutor of a student's difficulties and the construction by the student of a new personal understanding of a topic may be intimately connected." The other principal theme has been touched on earlier in this chapter – the positive motivational effects of this interactive shaping of understanding. Students expressed approval for the attention to themselves as individuals, the support and the stimulation associated with teaching sequences where the tutor worked actively and sensitively to direct them to a new understanding of a topic.

Some participants stressed the value of tutors insisting on the very clear and precise formulation of statements, including the exact use of technical terms. While these participants singled out the benefits that came from the tutor enforcing "clarity" and precision in argument and the use of language, other student participants expressed appreciation for the ways in which tutors acted to widen out and enrich discussion. They commented favourably on tutors introducing "new aspects" to debate and encouraging a more differentiated view of topics that were under discussion.

On the evidence of the interview material (and of the transcripts of tutorials), tutoring can be seen to involve an interplay between *taking out* an expert's view of a subject to students in terms that novices are likely to understand and *drawing in* students' more 'common-sense' understandings towards expert positions within the discipline.

A clearer sense of the nature of the task that may be faced by a tutor in 'disciplining' students' understanding may be gained by moving out for a

moment from the thesis to consider a quotation from the poet and philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore. The quotation is drawn from one of the celebrated series of talks that he held with Albert Einstein during 1930[1]. In conversation with Einstein, Tagore said:

> Science has proved that the table as a solid object is an appearance and therefore that which the human mind perceives as a table would not exist if that mind were naught. At the same time it must be admitted that the fact that the ultimate physical reality of the table is nothing but a multitude of separate revolving centres of electric force, also belongs to the human mind. In the apprehension of truth there is an eternal conflict between the universal human mind and the same mind confined in the individual. The perpetual process of reconciliation is being carried on in our science, philosophy, [and] in our ethics. (Robinson and Home, 1995, p.12)

If one substitutes for the phrase "universal human mind" the more modest formulation *the warranted knowledge and practices of a discipline,* this quotation provides a very striking insight into the work of a tutor.

Constraining or enabling understanding?

Different interpretative stances can be taken towards this practice of shaping and directing students' understanding towards appropriate positions within a discipline. One could, for example, follow a line of argument similar to the one pursued by Walkerdine (1988) in her radical deconstruction of the discursive practices of child-centred primary education. Walkerdine notes how the practices of child-centred primary education render the power relations between teacher and children invisible (p.210), and how "the *illusion*[2] of choice, of security and safety, are key features of what is taken to be correct classroom life." (p.211). She claims that: "The child is so positioned within the practice as to have not 'seen' power, and believes itself the originator, controller of its actions, its choice. It is a powerful illusion, an illusion of choice and control over one's destiny taken to be centrally implicated in producing the possibility of 'rational argument'." (p.210).

A similar position could be advanced with respect to the discursive practices that prevail in university small group teaching. It could be claimed that the

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[1] Talks which Sir Isaiah Berlin described as "a complete non-meeting of minds".
[2] Italics added.

informal social atmosphere and the democratic forms of address which characterise such groups give a false sense of agency which obscures the power of social discourses to form thought and action. Chapter 3 of this thesis argued that "such a radical critique paints a much too black and white picture of the nature of the relationship between university teachers and students" and of the purposes of teaching. The findings of the study give support to this claim made in Chapter 3. The preceding sections of this chapter have depicted the complexity of the relationships of power and of consent that exist between tutors and students. This complexity is not captured by an interpretative position which focuses solely on constraint and the imposition of power.

The effects of tutors' 'disciplining actions' are possibly represented more appropriately by recognising that they have a dual aspect, that they serve simultaneously to *enable* and *constrain* students' understanding. Tutors in their role as gatekeepers for a discipline, and guides to the less expert, have a responsibility to ensure that students are brought towards construing particular topics or problem situations in an appropriate fashion. This might be perceived as a *constraining* function. However, while performing these responsibilities, university teachers are enabling novices to gain new framing perspectives on topics and to develop their abilities. They are also assisting students to gain the knowledge and ways of acting which may allow them in turn to participate more fully in academic life, and to take at least some part in the debates which enliven and sustain many disciplines.

The line of reasoning pursued in the preceding paragraph is consonant with the position Shotter has adopted in his recent writings that were reviewed in Chapter 3. Shotter has drawn attention to the way in which gaining agency within a particular culture is dependent on learning the appropriate performance of the practices of that culture (Shotter, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). In his account of learning the *enabling* and *constraining* functions of teaching can be seen to be necessarily interlinked rather than opposed.

The dilemmas of tutoring

The preceding two sections of this chapter have examined the intricate web of norms that the student participants expected a tutor to follow. It has been noted earlier in the thesis that there was a potential for conflict between certain of the standards for conduct which the students believed a tutor ought to observe. For example, Chapter 6 has commented on how tension might arise between pursuing the goals of observing students' positive freedom, their right to be drawn into the discussion by the tutor, and their negative freedom to be secure from any overbearing demand to take part. In such a situation there is a need for a tutor to make an immediate practical and moral decision as to whether to put negative or positive politeness strategies into place (see Chapter 3). The accounts of the student participants also identified another pair of goals which could well conflict on occasion. The participants expected tutors very much to engage in an interactive style of teaching *and* to do so in a way which preserved individual student's rights and did not expose them to a loss of public face. Clearly there is the possibility that, although the second of these goals will very often act to support the first, tension could arise between the pursuit of these two goals.

Turning to look at the matter of tension and conflict between competing goals from the tutor's perspective, Chapter 7 has detailed how creating a climate of safety was a key concern for all of the tutors who were interviewed. The tutors were clearly of the opinion that students should not be treated in ways which threatened their public face. The need to avoid face-threatening actions was seen by the tutors not only as a point of good teaching practice, but also as an issue of moral principle. The tutors' accounts revealed that creating a general climate of safety within the group and avoiding acting towards individual students in a face-threatening fashion were not always unproblematic matters. For example, Chapter 7 noted that tutors may face the 'liberal paradox'. Quoting from that chapter, "limits may .. need to be placed on individual students, and direct, potentially threatening, actions taken against 'dominant' members of the group to protect the ideal of safe and free participation."

The potential tension, (that has already been identified from the student participants' interviews), between the purpose of pursuing an interactive

style of teaching and the aim of making sure that students did not lose face was revealed by the tutors to be a very real issue for day-to-day practice. The tutors showed that they were very alert to the feelings of threat that students might experience when their arguments, or 'misconceptions', were being examined in public. Sensitivity to the face concerns of students led them to set limits on the extent to which teaching actions, the exploration of particular intellectual matters, would be pursued. On this theme, Chapter 7 has described how one tutor's reflections on his practice disclosed that for him there was considerable strain between the duty to teach and the duty not to do harm.

This section of the chapter has been given the title *the dilemmas of tutoring* to highlight a fundamental issue. When there is a collision between the pursuit of particular aims of the sort that has been described in the preceding paragraph:
a) both goals cannot be pursued simultaneously, there is a real dilemma and
b) there is no overarching principle which can guide the tutor's decision on which aim to pursue.

From the accounts of the staff participants in the present study, it can be seen that tutoring is not simply a technical matter of rationally applying appropriate teaching and group facilitation tactics and techniques but also involves the need to make case by case moral decisions on how best to act when different duties conflict. These moral decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty, for a tutor cannot predict with complete precision how a student is likely to react to a particular remark.

(As an interesting aside, highlighting the potential conflict that may exist between pursuing certain teaching actions and avoiding acting in a harmful or hurtful manner raises important theoretical issues and practical problems for Artificial Intelligence researchers who are attempting to realise the goal of creating intelligent tutoring systems. It would be a diversion from my present purposes to pursue these issues in any depth within the thesis, but they are matters which I feel are of considerable importance to debates within cognitive science and which I mean to address in the future.)

Joining the tribe: changes over time

Switching from the tutors' perspective on small group-teaching to look at *changes over time* reported by the student participants; the process of joining the tribe, of becoming acculturated to the social and intellectual practices of small-group discussion in particular and of university life in general, can be described in terms of two stages. In the first stage students are faced with the transition from school to university and making an adjustment to the social and intellectual demands of small group teaching. Following this period of initial adjustment, a slow process of long-term change in the quality of the students' experience of tutorials and of their assimilation to the practice of academic discussion can be discerned.

Chapter 5 has described how many participants at the beginning of their undergraduate career were faced not only with the uncertainties that surrounded meeting new people in their tutorials, but with the need to read a new *type* of social context and to act appropriately within it. Participants' comments drew attention to a number of specific adaptations that students may need to make in their initial period at university. For some students there may be the tasks of getting used to tutors taking a less directive, authoritative stance than their teachers at school and of understanding that they themselves are expected to show more initiative and take more responsibility for their learning. There may also be a need for students coming from schools with an individualistic ethos to adjust to the norms of co-operation which prevail in university discussion groups. Aside from the possible requirements to take on a rather different set of values and view of oneself as a learner, students may find that discussion at university is of a different character from discussion at schools, and places greater intellectual demands on them. On this theme, Chapter 5 detailed how one student participant "saw discussion at school and discussion at university as being quite different activities actuated by qualitatively distinct expectations."

Some of the participants in the current study described tutorials in the early part of their career not only as a novel social situation in which they were somewhat uncertain as to how to act, but also as a source of considerable anxiety. The view of tutorials at the beginning of a student's academic studies as situations which brought both social and intellectual challenges –

challenges which might arouse anxiety in some students – needs to be balanced, however, by a recognition of their potential social benefits. A considerable number of the participants saw their early tutorials as offering the possibility to establish new social contacts and friendships. The value of having a sense of personal contact with a member of academic staff within the tutorial was also recognised. This personal contact with tutor and peers was particularly appreciated by those participants who at the beginning of their academic career saw university life as rather impersonal or 'faceless' in character.

As Chapter 5 has indicated entering fully into the practice of academic discussion involved more than making an initial set of adjustments to the values and ways of acting of a novel social situation. It entailed a much longer, slower process of acquiring knowledge in a discipline and of fuller acculturation to the ways of academic work and the forms of academic discourse. Student participants in the higher years of study identified a progression in their experience of tutorials along all of the following dimensions:

- *greater demands,*
- *increase in confidence,*
- *changes in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction,*
- *the benefits of experience and understanding of expectations,*
- and, *subject knowledge and the quality of discussion.*

There was very close correspondence between the descriptions that the student participants gave of these different dimensions of change over time and the accounts that the tutors gave of the differences that they perceived between first-year as opposed to final-year tutorials.

To recap on the nature of these changes, student participants talked of how over the years there had been an increase in the intellectual demands that were placed on them and in the requirement to demonstrate rather more independence and personal initiative in their studying. This increase in intellectual demands over time was accompanied by a decrease in the perception of tutorials as a *socially* demanding task. The participants noted a distinct increase in confidence in participation within tutorials as they had advanced through the years of their undergraduate career. Both staff and

student participants identified a marked change in the quality of discussion between first year and third or fourth year tutorials, which was linked to an increase in the knowledge of specific disciplines and knowledge of how to engage appropriately with academic tasks. This increase in knowledge, the building up of experience in taking part in tutorials and the clearer understanding of the expectations governing debate were viewed by some student participants as bringing about a change in the value that they attributed to tutorials. The benefits of small-group teaching were described as becoming more salient as they had gained experience in the ways of the academic tribe.

This reported increase in the quality of discussion in the later years of study was accompanied by a qualitative change in the social atmosphere of tutorials and in interaction with peers. Both student and staff informants also pointed up a certain change in the nature of the relationship between tutor and students. As the intellectual distance between students and staff diminished, the social relationship between them was perceived as being somewhat more equal. It seems reasonable to suggest, on the basis of the accounts given by participants in this study, that changes in the authority-dependency relationship of the type that Abercrombie wished to promote are likely to involve more than a change in 'attitude' per se, an increase in confidence, on the part of students. This perception of greater "equality" in the relationship between tutors and students in the higher years of study was firmly linked by both staff and student informants to a real decline in the asymmetry between staff and students in subject knowledge and experience of academic discussion. An increase in confidence, trusting and feeling free to use one's 'voice' in tutorials, was only one of an interconnected set of changes over time which can be seen to have led to a somewhat closer and more equal relationship between students and tutors.

On reviewing the whole set of changes over time that have been detailed in the preceding paragraphs, two conclusions can be drawn. One conclusion concerns methodological questions and the other concerns issues for good practice. Looking first at methodological questions, the developmental progression that is evident from student and tutor accounts of tutorials. and from my own observations, suggests that there is very good reason to exercise caution in sampling, and in generalising from findings, in future

studies on small group teaching. In a real sense, the first and fourth year tutorials observed within the current research project were somewhat different phenomena. The preceding discussion has drawn attention to the fact that some student participants in their third and fourth years of study, (in addition to noting changes in the quality of their experience of small group teaching over the years), described how the *value* that they ascribed to tutorials had increased as they had progressed in their academic career. Decisions about which particular *year group* to sample would appear to be a key methodological issue in research on small-group teaching.

The other chief conclusion that I derive from consideration of this set of changes over time is that it is not productive, or indeed wise, to attempt to identify a single 'ideal type' of tutorial style. Participants' accounts of change over time pointed up a developmental progression on a number of separable, albeit in practice interlinked, dimensions. Therefore, it would be implausible to suggest that there could be a single ideal way to proceed which would be appropriate for both a first year group and a fourth year group. Indeed the tutors in the present study reported marked differences in the way that they conducted first year as opposed to final year tutorials, commenting that they needed "to do less" when they were leading fourth year groups. In contrast to the fourth year groups which could be run in a more 'hands-off' fashion, some tutors described how with a first year group they needed to give direction to the discussion and to take a very active part in shaping the content of the talk. The final section of this chapter, *directions for future work on small group teaching,* will describe how the analysis that is proceeding of the transcripts of the talk that was recorded within tutorials itself reveals striking differences between first and fourth year tutorials. One of these differences was in the nature of student-tutor interaction. The adjustments in style that tutors described themselves making between first and fourth year tutorials can indeed be observed happening in practice. Both the interview material reported in this thesis, and the analysis of tutorial transcripts, lead me to suggest that rather than seeking to define an invariant set of features associated with success in tutoring, it is more sensible to view good tutoring as requiring flexibility of response – an ability to tailor actions sensitively to the characteristics and needs of individual groups of students.

The argument that has been presented against the search for an ideal type of tutorial style may seem to some readers to be labouring a straightforward point; but this is not a trivial matter for practice. The current literature that is concerned with the training of tutors and with providing a guide to practice is not informed, to any extent, by a recognition of the need to tailor tutoring actions to the requirements of different year groups. It is very often treated as quite unproblematic that a set of prescriptions for good practice can be applied to different year groups without any modification. Equally worrying to my mind is the assumption, which is again very common, that guidelines for practice can be provided without considering the effects of discipline content on the nature of discussion. On the basis of this present study, I feel confident in claiming that neglect of this matter ought to be remedied.

The practice of argument

The preceding section has noted how both staff and student informants identified a marked change in the quality of discussion as students progressed from first to fourth year. Over the course of their degree students had become much more competent in the practice of academic argument. What, however, were key features of this *practice of academic argument*? A sense of what was involved in becoming a competent participant in academic discussions can be gained from the tutors' reflections on the nature of discussion skills. Chapter 7 has drawn attention to the fact that some tutors, such as Tutor G, saw the development of discussion skills as requiring progress on a number of separate, but very tightly interrelated fronts. Effective participation in academic discussion was seen as dependent on interconnected developments in:

- *communication skills,*
- the knowledge of the *content* of a discipline,
- and of the *forms of discourse* in which this content is expressed.

It has already been noted that student participants also viewed change over time in the quality of tutorial talk as being linked to the acquisition of subject knowledge and of a more analytical approach to discussion topics.

Learning to communicate appropriately in academic settings would appear, from the present study, to involve more than acquiring the intellectual competencies which have been outlined in the preceding paragraph. The comments of some of the tutors pointed up the fact that the practice of academic argument is an accomplishment which cannot be wholly defined in narrowly cognitive terms. It will be recalled, for example, from Chapter 7 that one of the tutors set great store on the matter of students learning to argue in an *impersonal* fashion. To recap on her own words: "being able to divorce subject matter and reasonable discourse from personalities is very important". Statements made by some of the student participants suggested that they were indeed developing the ability to employ an impersonal style of argument of the type described by Tutor E. These participants believed that it was important to argue in a socially sensitive manner which did not threaten the face of a peer; and that any challenge should be focused firmly on the *content* of discussion, not on the *person* whose utterance was being contested. They also described particular tactics that they would use to keep attention centred on the content and avoid threat to an individual whose position was being challenged.

The interview material referred to in the preceding paragraph suggests that part of the process of becoming a fully fledged participant in academic discussion involves acquiring forms of discourse and tactics of presentation that are deemed to be *socially and morally appropriate* within the context of academic debate.

To summarise the main themes that have been presented within this section of the chapter, being able to enter fully into the practice of argument in academic contexts entails developing declarative and procedural knowledge in specific disciplines, including the acquisition of the discourse forms appropriate to these disciplines. At the same time, it requires the development of interpersonal skills and specific communication tactics that will allow one to observe the norms governing how one ought to argue with others. The acquisition of this way of acting and being within academic contexts can be seen therefore to be a considerable accomplishment; one involving much more than the acquisition of discrete and transferable "oral communication skills".

Common expectations, contrasting perspectives

On examining the whole corpus of interview material collected in the study, a set of expectations common to both student participants and the tutors can be discerned. There was clear general agreement on the principal features of the *moral order* that ought to prevail within tutorials. Student and staff members of a tutorial group were expected to avoid treating individuals in a threatening way; and it was believed that a good tutorial would be characterised by a friendly, co-operative ethos. It was anticipated that a democratic form of discourse would be used within tutorials and that overt markers of the asymmetry in power between tutor and students would be avoided. There was a consensus of opinion among the student participants on what constituted legitimate and unacceptable displays of tutor authority. They also viewed their peers as having the responsibility to make an effort for the common good by preparing for tutorials; and expressed strong disapproval of 'dominant' students who were seen to make claims to an unfairly large share of the floor.

In contrast to this agreement on the principles that should govern social interaction in tutorials, there were distinct differences in perspective among the student participants on how debate should be structured. Student opinion on this matter ranged between the opposed poles of wishing a very wide-ranging or a tightly focused discussion. Some of the implications for tutorial practice of these differences in stylistic preferences have already been explored in Chapter 6. Another implication for practice is that there may be a need to rethink the prescriptions that Abercrombie, and other pioneers of the use of small group teaching, provided for the structuring of discussion. Her use of the terms "free" or "associative" to describe the discussion groups that she ran, in itself indicates the importance that she placed on having a free-ranging discussion. She described how in her first project with medical students: "However widely the discussion ranged, it was relevant to scientific ways of thinking and behaving." (Nias, 1993, p.16). A wide-ranging discussion of the type that Abercrombie advocated may well be of very considerable value to individual students. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the sense of frustration that may be felt by students who want a clearer and tighter structure. Firmly prescribing a wide-ranging discussion as the ideal way to assist students' intellectual and

personal development would seem to be unwise. It has been noted already that good tutoring is characterised by a flexibility of response to the needs of a specific group of students within a particular disciplinary and institutional context. It appears reasonable to suggest that this flexibility of response should include the ability to vary the structure of discussion to take account of the differing stylistic preferences of students.

There is another aspect of the structuring of discussion which is highlighted by the findings of the current study. Whereas Abercrombie had as a principal aim for small-group teaching bringing about a change in the "authority-dependency relationship", the students whom I interviewed expected tutors to make appropriate use of their authority as subject experts by engaging actively in particular types of teaching interaction during the meeting of the group. To assist a student to construct a new understanding of a topic will very often entail keeping talk focused tightly on a very specific subject. Pursuing an active teaching role may not require a tutor to adopt a very focused *global* style of structuring debate. However, there is likely to be a need for a clear, fairly firm structure at a *local* level within particular teaching interactions.

Directions for future work on small-group teaching

The Methodology chapter described how the interview study which has formed the basis of this thesis was part of a wider research project. The project as a whole involved non-participant observation of a considerable number of tutorials and the analysis of audio-recordings of the discussion, in addition to interviews. Work is in progress on the analysis of audio-recordings from a sample of the tutorials which were observed. This analysis of the talk within tutorials will appear in a number of future publications. The close reading of the tutorial talk is providing insights into matters such as how the work of *disciplining* students' understanding is achieved and how an *informal social atmosphere* is constituted through the use of particular politeness strategies and the forms of a democratic discourse.

One of the most striking findings that is emerging from the analysis of the tutorial transcripts is the marked differences that can be observed between

the discussion performance of first as opposed to third and fourth year students. For example, third and fourth year students made longer utterances, and ones which exhibited a greater depth and breadth of knowledge. The reports that the student participants gave of the changes that had occurred over time in the quality of tutorial interaction are matched by the findings from the analysis of talk. Similarly, the tutors' depiction of first and fourth year tutorials as being qualitatively different experiences, and of their need to adapt their approach to different year groups, is borne out by the comparison of tutor actions between first and fourth year tutorials.

In passing, it should be noted that the analysis of tutorial talk that is in progress does not have inappropriately grand ambitions. I am aware of the dangers and difficulties that surround attempting to give a reductionist account of a complex quality such as group atmosphere in terms of specific features of the speech that was used in tutorials. I have heeded the sensible warning given by Edwards and Furlong in their 1978 study into the use of language in education that: "Speech may take the *form* it does because of what it is being used to do, but it is extremely difficult to identify this happening." (Edwards and Furlong, 1978). However, it is interesting and profitable to identify particular features of talk which *may* have contributed to the creation of a safe, informal group atmosphere or *may* have acted to discipline students' understanding.

Turning from my own continuing work on small-group teaching, this present research project has alerted me to a number of questions that it would be profitable to pursue in future studies and theoretical issues that require greater attention. One area in particular on which this current study failed to shed any light was that of gender relations and gender issues within small-group teaching. There was very little talk on the part of the student participants on their perceptions of gender relations within tutorials, or on more general gender issues. It has been noted that it is not possible to decide definitely whether the paucity of talk on this area was the result of failings in the present study or reflects the fact that participants did not tend to view tutorials through "the lenses of gender" (Bem, 1993). Future work which focuses closely on questions concerning gender relations and gender issues

within small-group teaching in higher education would illuminate an area which at present remains somewhat obscure.

Apart from the need to make good this particular lacuna in knowledge, more studies which look at general aspects of small-group teaching would be appropriate. As Chapters 1 and 2 have indicated, very little research interest indeed has been shown in this area in recent years. The lack of contemporary research on this type of teaching and learning means that reliance has to be placed on a 'historical' view, on older studies which observed a very different higher education scene. It will take much more than a single study to rectify the lack of a clear, current picture of small-group teaching and to provide a fund of insights which can inform good practice.

There is another strong reason to argue for further work in this area. A central refrain of this thesis has been the importance of recognising the way in which individuals' actions are embedded within particular contexts, and at the same time construct or reproduce these contexts. Students and members of academic staff in other settings may possibly relate to each other socially in different ways, use somewhat different forms of discourse and engage in a different style of teaching/learning interaction. It would be valuable to see studies of small-group teaching conducted in institutions which had a somewhat different ethos and set of working practices from the Faculty of Social Sciences in The University of Edinburgh. In particular, it would be of great value to see cross-cultural studies conducted in this area. Such studies might give some sense of how the culture and role expectations of a wider society impinge upon interaction in small groups in higher education and shape the nature of the relationships between members of academic staff and students.

Moving from these arguments for further research to be conducted on small-group teaching to look more generally at issues in research on learning, the experience of conducting this study has drawn attention to certain directions that it would be valuable to follow in future empirical work and theorising. For Vygotsky himself, affect and cognition were not viewed as discrete, separate entities (Newman and Holzman, 1993, p.78). However, for very many, albeit not all, 'neo-Vygotskians' the emphasis in their research and

account of development has been on the intellectual scaffolding provided to children and adult novices by more knowledgeable members of a society and on the 'internalization' of instruction. The affective aspects of learning in small groups figured very prominently in participants' accounts within the current interview study. These accounts can be seen to highlight the need to give somewhat greater research attention to the affective aspects of learning in higher education than has been customary in the past. The material gathered in the present study, where there was a close interweaving of the affective and intellectual aspects of learning in small groups, would also appear to confirm the utility of Vygotsky's insight that affect and cognition should not be treated as separable entities.

Particular affective aspects of learning in higher education that it would seem, on the basis of this study, to be very worthwhile to pursue in detail would be the feelings surrounding one's sense of identity as a learner and how best to assist students to develop 'a sense of belonging' to the academic community in which they find themselves. Another matter which would repay closer examination is the *felt* sense of agency in learning, or the disempowering sense of lack of control and effect, that flow from different teaching practices. It has already been noted that this study has given a glimpse into how a student can regard the teaching actions of certain tutors as both encouraging and as an aid to 'thinking for yourself'. Research which focuses on the relationship between teaching practices, affect and a personal sense of agency as a learner of a discipline is likely to bring insights that will benefit day-to-day practice.

A student's felt sense of agency as a thinker within a discipline will clearly be strongly influenced by the particular set of power relations that exist between academic staff and learners in a given institution of higher education. As a final pointer to directions for future work, and indeed as a final word, I want to draw attention to the need not only for more empirical studies which centre on questions related to power and authority in higher education settings, but also for a much more adequate conceptualisation of power in educational settings. The presentation and analysis of the student participants' statements concerning the obligations of tutors, legitimate and unacceptable displays of authority and their own responsibilities revealed an intricate set of expectations. Within this set of expectations there was a

delicate balance, and the potential for tension, between negative and positive freedoms. The asymmetry in knowledge between tutor and students also introduced some complexity into how the tutor's authority was viewed. The discussion of issues surrounding power and authority in small group teaching has highlighted how some current theorising on power in educational settings is not well placed to capture and interpret this intricate web of expectations and reported practice. The thesis has suggested some of the features that a more adequate theoretical framework for understanding power relations should display; and it is to be hoped that this particular intellectual challenge will be pursued with greater vigour by educational researchers and social theorists.

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Appendix A

11 October 1991

Dear Student,

I am a lecturer in the Department of Education here at Edinburgh. During the first and second terms of this academic year, I will be sitting in on a number of tutorials in different departments in the Social Sciences faculty.

I have two main purposes in my present study of tutorials. One purpose is to describe in some detail the nature of the talk, discussion, which takes place in tutorials. In particular I am concerned with identifying types of discussion in tutorials which seem to be particularly helpful in increasing students' understanding of a subject. In other words I am concerned with highlighting examples of good practice in tutorials, and I am not here to evaluate your own performance or that of your tutor.

My other main purpose is to gain a clear picture of how students themselves view tutorials, and how they describe the features of a 'good tutorial'. Accordingly I'll be asking you to agree to take part in a short interview with me at the end of this term, or the beginning of next term. During that interview you will have an opportunity to state your own views on features of tutorials which you like or dislike; and your views will be treated in confidence.

I appreciate that I am present as a guest in your tutorial group, and I shall try to be an unobtrusive guest who fits in well with the smooth running of your tutorial.

My thanks for your cooperation .

Yours sincerely,

Charles Anderson